



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 9.

Price, Five Cents.



"A MOVE, AND YOU ARE DEAD MEN!" ROARED JESSE JAMES, COVERING THE ENGINEER AND FIREMAN WITH A BRACE OF REVOLVERS.



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No. 9.

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Price Five Cents.

JESSE JAMES AT THE THROTTLE;

OR,

The Hold-Up at Dead Man's Ditch.

By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE MEETING.

"Halt!"

"What for?"

"These are private grounds and you are trespassing!"

"The deuce you say!"

"Who the devil are you, anyway?"

The speaker, a Pinkerton detective by the name of Robert Venner, stared curiously at the figure before him, and then turned and glared at his companion.

"That's the question, stranger! Who are you?" repeated the second detective.

The dwarfed and uncouth-looking creature who had halted them in the very wilds of Southern Wyoming, shifted his gun to his other shoulder and planted himself a little more firmly in their path before he answered the questioner.

"That's a fair question, gentlemen," he said, finally, with a shrewd twist of his ugly features, "and I'll just return the compliment by asking you the same, Who the devil are you and what do you want in this section of the country?"

"We are not looking for you if you are an honest man," said Venner, "so get out of the way, or it will be the worse for you!"

His hand dropped to his pistol as he spoke, but the dwarf was too quick for him.

Jerking an ugly-looking "bulldog" from his belt, he snapped the trigger.

Crack!

A bullet whistled past the first detective's ear, still the weapon was not lowered and the ugly fellow whom they had encountered so unexpectedly seemed anxious to again pull the trigger.

"Drop that or you are a dead man!" roared the sec-

ond detective, at the same time drawing a bead on the fellow's heart.

Snap!

Crack!

Bang!

The three explosions came almost simultaneously; then the uncouth creature took to his heels and disappeared in the bushes with a yell of pain.

"We winged him, Higgins! Can you make him out? He may be a hermit or something on that order."

"Better walk backwards for a while and see that he isn't up to any tricks."

"He's too scared for that! Still, I'll take your advice, old man."

"Where are we, anyway? I think we're on the wrong trail."

"Hold on a minute! The Big Horn to the west, the Platte behind us—that water we saw an hour ago was the Powder River. We're just over the border of Crook County. What I should like to know is where this trail leads to."

"Exactly what I was beginning to wonder when we met this little cuss. If the fellow hadn't been so quick with his shooting irons, we might have asked him."

"I would not have taken his word if he had told us. He's probably an outlaw who is hiding in the mountains, and I could see that he was suspicious the minute he saw us."

"Hark! What was that?"

The two detectives stopped suddenly. The whinnying of horses could be heard distinctly at a distance.

"Curse him! I believe the fellow is a horse thief!" said Venner, softly. "Perhaps he's running a little stock farm out here in the wilderness!"

"There he goes! He's riding one horse and leading another!" exclaimed Higgins, pointing to the east.

The dwarf, seated on a magnificent horse, could be seen climbing a gentle knoll, and another fine specimen of horse flesh was ambling along behind him.

Passing over the knoll, he spurred his horses into a gallop and disappeared on the other side.

"We'd have done better if we had stuck to the stage coach and gone on to Little City," said Venner, after a pause, as he again took his bearings.

"We'd have missed our game if we had, old man. Jesse James is in Crook County, according to all reports, and if he is the one who robbed the bank at Little City night before last, he'll be trying to get out of the county to-day. We ought to be on his track by this time to-morrow."

"You think he'll make a break for Custer County at once?"

"Yes. The people here are after him red hot. The

sheriffs of Crook County and Pease are on the look-out day and night."

The two hurried on in spite of the fact that they were footsore and weary, and the pangs of hunger were proving decidedly uncomfortable.

The sun was setting and the sky was dyed a rich vermilion. Night was coming on, and unless they found the right trail at once they were doomed to a chilly night of it under the shadow of the mountains.

"Hello! What is that?" asked Higgins, suddenly. "I heard somebody shout. Didn't you hear it, Venner? It came from behind that knoll," and he pointed in that direction.

Venner dropped to one knee and put his ear to the ground.

"Horsemen, by Jove! And half a dozen of the best! Quick!"

The two sprang into the bushes as they spoke, and, at that moment, a group of five horsemen turned the bend a few rods distant.

"They're desperadoes, all right! I've seen two of them before," whispered Venner, as he peered through the bushes.

"Lie low, Higgins! The ruffians are almost upon us."

"Don't forget the signals," were the last warning words; then, as the little party came nearer, the detectives sank still lower in the bushes.

Boisterous laughter and rude jests now greeted their ears, and both were interlarded with profuse profanity. Suddenly the leader of the band swung around in his saddle. He had noticed almost intuitively that his horse had begun limping.

"Hold on, men! My horse is lame! We've put miles enough between us and that pack of human bloodhounds! We'll stop for an hour and rest in the trees yonder!"

The speaker was none other than the bandit king, Jesse James, and, as he gave the order to his men, he slid from the saddle.

"Say, friends, I, for one, am mighty glad to be on my feet again," said a deep voice, and Frank James, Jesse's brother, dropped to the ground and began rubbing his cramped limbs in an energetic manner.

"Fourteen hours in the saddle is too long, Jess, even if we have corralled swag enough to last us six months without working. Hello! Fleetwind has got a stone in her foot! She must have more than an hour's rest."

Jesse James removed the stone from his pet's foot and flung it away with an oath.

"That cursed posse is to blame for this. They gave me no chance to stop. Well, come along, men!

the horses behind the bushes and let them rest until dark, at any rate."

The companions of the famous outlaw had all dismounted from their horses and were nothing loth to carry out his orders.

Five minutes later their horses were tied within forty feet of the two detectives, and then the outlaws began a vigorous attack upon the underbrush with their knives. A half hour later they had made quite a clearing, and as they threw themselves upon the ground they expressed their satisfaction. Drawing a dry sandwich from his pocket, Jesse James began to eat it, while the others contented themselves with a pull at their pocket flasks and a fresh chew of tobacco.

"Where do you reckon we've left them, Jess?" asked a red-headed, evil-eyed member of the gang, whose name was Jake Turner.

"We gave 'em the slip at the Cross Road Tavern," was the answer. "They think we are making straight for Miles City, curse them, but the fools don't know me! I'm over the border now, so their papers can't touch me, and, as for their bullets, they'll never do any damage!"

The others laughed, and the outlaw continued:

"This trail runs in the same direction as the Powder River trail, as far as Red Water Creek. If the sheriff and his men come this way, they've got to pass this spot, but it's my opinion they're on the other trail now, which means that in two hours we'll be behind 'em."

"But s'pose them two fellows that left ther stage wuz Pinkerton chaps, Jess! They're sure to be on yer trail somewheres!" said Jake, cautiously.

"Bah! Suppose they are! Frank and I can attend to the sheriff and his pack while you and Bill look after the detectives. That leaves Hawk free to put in a shot wherever it is needed, but there's no need to bother about the sleuthhounds. They are probably lost in the woods by this time."

"It's queer they left the stage as they did, though, Jess! I wonder if they suspected that we were going to attack it."

"I don't know, and I don't care! The fellow we were after was there. A fine sort of a chap to be a bank messenger! Why, the fellow whimpered like a woman when we made him shell out his treasure!"

"A cool ten thousand, wasn't it, Jess?"

"Yes, two thousand apiece, if I haven't lost it."

He dove down into a capacious pocket as he spoke, and drew out a flat package. A moment later, he dragged four others from various parts of his clothing.

"I'll put it all in one package and tie it to my saddle," he began, as he fingered the parcels, "then I'll divide the stuff evenly when we get to Durfie's to-night——"

"We won't get ter Durfie's, Jess! Your hoss is too

lame fer that!" called Bill Prentiss, the other member of the gang who had gone to look at the horses while Jesse James was talking.

With another oath the outlaw slipped the parcels back into his pocket and then he walked over to his horse to discover the extent of the lameness.

The detectives strained their ears to hear the result of the examination, for, if the outlaws were forced to remain there, they were not in the most enviable position that could be imagined.

Jesse James broke the silence that lasted while he was examining the horse.

"There's no use, boys! We can't go on! She's strained her leg somehow or other. I wouldn't ride her again to-night for ten thousand dollars!"

"That's about the size of it!"

"Then we've got to camp out!"

"If it wasn't so cursed chilly I wouldn't object, as I'm almighty tired, and it won't do to build a fire," said Frank James.

They all moved back toward the clearing, and, in the general commotion, Higgins slipped cautiously through the bushes to the side of his companion.

A whispered consultation followed, but it was quickly interrupted.

"Hello! What was that? I heard a rustle in the bushes!" said Frank James, softly. "Go easy, Jess! The hounds may be nearer than we fancy!"

Jesse James sprang to his feet and bent his head to listen.

"It must hev been a wildcat or somethin', tho' it's a leetle too light fer them critters ter be on ther rampage," remarked Jake, with a glance toward the sky.

"It must have been one of the horses, for the sheriff was off the scent an hour ago, and, as for the detectives——"

"Sh! Get behind a tree, Jess! I tell you those bushes are moving!" whispered Frank James again with his eagle eyes fixed upon the very clump behind which the detectives were hiding.

Jesse James muttered a curse, and moved forward, rather than backward, and at the same time his hand fell heavily upon the butt of his revolver.

Crack!

Bang!

Thud!

A bullet whistled past his ear and buried itself in a tree trunk behind him.

In a second five weapons were emptied into the bushes, then the outlaws heard their horses snorting with fear.

"Quick! See to them, Hawk! It's those cursed detectives!" roared Jesse James.

"Shoot them down like dogs!"

A roar of derisive laughter followed his remark, and a great crashing and stamping in the bushes followed.

Then the two detectives dashed out into the trail upon the backs of the two freshest horses.

A volley of leaden hail followed them, but they were off like the wind.

Jesse James had been tricked for once in his life, and for the next ten minutes his rage was terrible to behold.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN.

"We take the first trick, but that doesn't mean that we win," laughed Higgins, when they were out of reach of the bullets. "We've left them three lame horses, so there's not much danger of their following us, but now the question is, where is Durfie's tavern?"

Venner peered around into the deepening twilight, but he had only Jesse James' own statement to guide him.

"He said this trail ran parallel with the Powder River trail until it came to Red Water Creek. Now, if we could only have the good luck to overhaul the sheriff's posse!"

"It's a pity my bullet missed Jess," said Higgins. "I only got a bead on him once, and then my cramped position bothered me. Well, I'm thankful to have cut loose from that company any old way! Imagine what it would have meant if we had been obliged to camp out with them!"

"I ain't sure but what we've jumped out of the frying pan into the fire! Look ahead there, old man, and tell me what is coming!"

Higgins leaned forward in his saddle and peered ahead.

The sun had set now, and it was growing dark very rapidly.

"Another lot of cutthroats, I'll bet," he muttered, as he saw a group of horsemen approaching. "What the deuce will we do? We can't go back, that's certain!"

"Then we'll go ahead! Come!" said Venner, as he spurred on his horse.

A moment later, a tremendous voice roared out at them, and they found their progress stopped by a determined-looking party.

"Halt! Throw up your hands! Ha! ha! we've got you at last!" shouted the foremost rider of the group. "Now, then, hands lowered for one second will prove your death, you rascals! Surround them, men, and identify them if you can! I can swear that those are two of the outlaw gang's horses!"

The detectives had put up their hands at once, but Venner explained the situation with alacrity:

"I don't know you, gentlemen, but I am Robert Ven-

ner of St. Louis, and my friend here is Mr. Higgins of Chicago. We left the stage coach at noon to-day about nine miles north of Little City, and struck across to Cedar Hill Pass in the hopes of finding Powder River, but we were surprised in the woods by a visit from Jesse James and his gang, and, having an opportunity to do so, we helped ourselves to these horses."

"The deuce you say! Now that's a likely story! Ha! ha! I reckon now you think you can fool a sheriff. You're robbers and cutthroats, and a movement will send you to perdition! Step up, men, and relieve them of their weapons! Thank the stars we've caught two of the pesky ruffians!"

Venner burst out laughing and Higgins joined him, but they both knew that the situation was not without perils.

Behind the sheriff were six determined-looking men whose fingers were fairly aching to pull a trigger.

"If you don't believe us, we'll take you right back where we got the horses," chimed in Higgins, eagerly. "Jesse James and four of his men are camped out in the clump of trees over yonder. We left them three lame horses, so now is your chance, sheriff! You know Jesse James is not half so formidable when he is not on his horse, Fleetwind."

"You seem to know the man and his horse pretty well," said the sheriff, as he urged his horse nearer, so that he could study the detective's features.

"Who doesn't?" asked Higgins, quickly. "I'd like to see the man who didn't know that much about him. Well, what is it? Do we go back or not? This position is getting uncomfortable."

"Who be you, anyway?" asked the sheriff, peering closer. "I mean, what's your business in this part of the country?"

The two men glanced at each other and then Venner decided to speak the truth.

"We are Pinkerton detectives on the track of Jesse James! We were within twenty feet of him half an hour ago, but could do nothing but steal his horses!"

"Why not?" thundered the sheriff and his men, in breath.

Venner lowered his arms and smiled grimly as he answered:

"One reason is that we were crouching in the bushes and could not get a bead on the fellow, and the other reason is because we want to catch him alive, if possible!"

"Hang it! You can't do that, man! You should have shot him down like a dog! So he's skulking in the woods yonder, do you hear that, men! The robbers are after is right ahead of us, and, what's more, he's too crippled to run!"

"Go easy, sheriff! Don't let ther two chaps fool ye!" warned one of the dark-browed men. "There's purty slick fellers in Jesse James' gang! It ain't er goin' ter do ter take no chances!"

"Where's yer badges?" asked the sheriff, suddenly, in a businesslike voice.

Venner took off his slouch hat and pulled out the lining.

A detective's badge was carefully hidden in the tattered head covering.

Higgins displayed his, also, and the posse was satisfied.

The two detectives were given back their weapons and a fresh supply of ammunition, and then they wheeled their horses around and led the way, with the sheriff close upon their heels, and his men following him silently.

Darkness had fallen now, and the riding was done carefully, each man scanning the path before him and keeping one hand upon his weapon.

Suddenly Venner, who was ahead, gave a low, sharp order.

"Halt! The rascals have seen us! They have fired the bushes, and, by thunder, the wind is bringing the flames toward us!"

As he spoke, every man of them turned their eyes toward the distant grove, where they could see tongues of flame darting here and there among the stunted trees.

"They're gone the other way! Quick! Turn, or you'll be too late! If that fire reaches the underbrush, we'll have to run for it! There's been no rain for a month, and the bushes are like tinder!"

While the sheriff was delivering this warning, the horses were turned, and, as they all dashed back over the narrow trail, the flames seemed to suddenly burst into a glare that lit up the scene like magic.

Venner glanced back over his shoulder and saw the red glow spreading over the landscape. It rose to about the height of the horse's head, so it was plainly to be seen that the underbrush was burning.

A strong wind swept over the mountain and the fire came on like a flood of flame. They had a mile the start of it, but no one could foresee the ending.

There were seven miles of rough country to be traversed before Red Water Creek could be crossed, so the sheriff headed his men west toward Powder River, which would give them less than two miles of more open country.

As they clattered down the hills, the sea of fire was hidden from their view, but, on the crest of each knoll they could note its progress.

Suddenly Venner gave a shout of astonishment that brought the whole party to a halt.

He had discovered the figures of a dozen horsemen slowly gaining upon them.

They were being pursued, not only by the sea of flames, but by Jesse James and an increased number of his followers.

"It is he! It is Jesse James!" he shouted. "Hold on, sheriff! There's no use to run from them! They've got fresh horses in some way, the rascals."

The whole posse had stopped at his very first word, and now they lined up together in a businesslike manner, prepared for a fight to the death.

Jesse James was between them and the fire, but there was no time now to wonder at his position.

The sheriff's voice rang out as soon as the galloping horses came within hailing distance.

"Halt! Throw up your hands or you are dead men!"

A volley from a dozen weapons was the only answer, and the mad riders came on like a whirlwind, with the sea of flame behind them.

Once more the sheriff roared out his order, and a fusillade of bullets was poured upon the approaching horsemen.

There were curses and yells. Then the snorting of the horses could be heard. As the desperate riders bore down upon the sheriff's posse, there was a general emptying of weapons.

"Great Scott! Does the man fear nothing?" muttered Venner.

The next moment a bullet struck him in the shoulder and he reeled from the saddle.

Jesse James swept on like the wind, with his men falling all around him, and, as he forced his horse over the bodies of three of the sheriff's posse, who had fallen in the trail, he looked back over his shoulder and shouted in derision:

"Ha! ha! you thought you had me trapped, did you? Take that for your impudence, sheriff!"

He aimed squarely at the sheriff as he spoke and pulled the trigger of his weapon at the very instant that both horses reared to escape colliding with each other.

The sheriff went down like a log with his horse on top of him; then Jesse James, with only five men at his heels, thundered on, thus putting the small band of his enemies between him and the sea of flame that was sweeping rapidly nearer.

As soon as they could check the speed of their horses, the bandits turned. They had no idea of going on until their last foe was vanquished.

Of the sheriff's posse only three were left, but Higgins had a revolver in both hands and was doing double duty.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

The encounter was kept up until the hot breath of the

flames reached them; then, with a final shout of derision, the outlaw abandoned the contest and spurred his horse on, bidding those who dared to follow him.

He had lost another man, but, as his figure disappeared in the weird glare of the firelight, not a member of the sheriff's posse was able to follow him.

Higgins, with two others who were unharmed, had all they could do to keep the horses quiet and examine their fallen companions to see who were dead and who living.

With the bushes burning all around them, they succeeded in raising the living men to their saddles; then, mounting behind them, they began once more the race with death.

Five minutes later, the wind veered suddenly and the fire swept like a cloud away to the east, leaving the exhausted men safe from further danger in that direction.

"How is it, old man? Are you badly hurt?" asked Higgins, as Venner leaned heavily upon his shoulder.

The plucky detective gritted his teeth as he replied:

"I guess it is only a flesh wound in my shoulder. Bind it up, old man, as quickly as possible, for I must have another chance at that devil! Once let me wing the scoundrel and I believe I could die happy!"

They halted and the wounds of the three injured men were attended to as carefully as was possible under the circumstances; then began a slow march to Red Water Creek, on the bank of which was located a house known as Durfie's tavern.

A short distance from the house the posse halted.

It was possible that Jesse James had stopped at the tavern, and might be waiting for them, but the injured men were in need of care, so there was no other alternative but to advance to the inn.

With loaded weapons in their hands, the desperate men approached the house.

It was a low, rambling old structure, almost hidden among the trees, and now not a sign of life was visible about it.

Suddenly the hoarse growl of a bloodhound burst upon their ears. This was followed by another and another until it was plain that a whole pack of the brutes were near them, but, as the creatures were not in sight, the men advanced to the door of the tavern.

"What is the place, anyway?" asked Higgins, as one of the men kicked vigorously on the panels.

"A roadhouse, run by an ex-horse thief," answered one of the sheriff's men, promptly, "so Jesse James is welcome here, while we are strangers, but Durfie will not dare to defy the law! He must give us his protection!"

"Aye! That he must!" growled an ugly voice as the heavy door swung open. "Walk in, gentlemen, and

make yourselves at home, while I go myself and stall your horses!"

The voice was guttural and hoarse, but the fellow seemed civil, and Higgins leaned forward in his saddle to get a good look at him.

"Any other guests, Durfie?" asked the sheriff's man sharply. "Don't lie about it, man! Is Jesse James at his gang at the tavern?"

"He was here, but he's gone on as if the devil was after him! One of the niggers took them over the creek that's why I'm playing 'ostler!"

"I'm glad they didn't tarry," said the sheriff's man with a breath of relief. "With three wounded men on our hands, we are in no condition for fighting."

Durfie had moved away, so he did not hear the last and, as the men helped their companions to the ground, he took the animals by the bridles and strode away into the darkness.

Higgins had not said a word, but his eyes and ears had been busy. The minute he saw the fellow he was suspicious of Durfie.

He had heard a description of the man in the stage coach that day, and he felt reasonably sure that this fellow was not Durfie, but there was no time now to investigate the matter.

He had his friend to attend to, but he was determined to keep his wits about him.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOGUS LANDLORD.

As the detective did his thinking, he glanced at his companions, but it was plain from their faces that they did not share his suspicions.

He began to wonder if he could be mistaken, and while they were putting the injured men to bed, he ran over the points that had been given him about Durfie to see if they tallied with the acting landlord of the tavern.

"Ever seen Durfie before?" he asked of the sheriff's man nearest him.

"Naw, not's I know of! Perkins hyar has, though. He's an ugly brute when he's mad, they say, tho' he's been peace'ble enough sence he's kept ther tavern."

"Hello, Durfie! Is thar a docter in these parts?" he continued, as he heard the man's step on the stairs leading to the bedrooms.

"I'm ther only sawbones round erbout hyar, and I'm comin' as fast as I can!" answered the guttural voice, then the men could hear him stamping around in the room below them, as though he had forgotten something and had gone back to get it.

"I thought Durfie was an Irishman. That fellow has no brogue," said Higgins, again.

"He's anything, Durfie is!" was the ugly answer. "He kin use any old language that suits him best. There ain't no gaugin' him by his speech nor nothin' else, I reckon!"

"How did he get this place?"

"Sh! Here he comes!" was the answer.

Durfie stamped into the room with a bottle and some bandages in his hands.

"Haul off, there, an' let me clap an eye on yer wounded men!" he said, grimly. "So ye've been in a scrimmage, hev ye?"

Higgins started to speak and then changed his mind, busying himself over Venner and letting the sheriff's man do the talking.

"Yes, we've been in er scrimmage, an' we'll soon be in another, ef you don't look out fer it, Durfie! We sot out ter ketch thet thar robber, Jesse James, and the villain hez outnumbered us and killed the sheriff."

"Ye don't say! Wall, I can't say I'm sorry fer thet thar! I warn't in love with ther sheriff, nor he with me. Is thet all he killed? If it is, it's a poor record fer Jess! I'm only wonderin' how he come ter leave so many of ye!"

"The grass wuz on fire and he hed ter run fer it. Now, then, landlord, give us er lift ter put these three ter bed, and yer promise thet, so long as they need it, they shall hev yer protection!"

"My hand on it, stranger! Sick men an' ministers are safe at Durfie's, but, as fer ther rest of ye, wall, ye'll hev ter take yer chances!"

He shot an evil glance from his eyes in the detective's direction as he spoke.

An hour later, Perkins, Higgins, Pete Cole, the other member of the posse and their host met in the main room of the shanty, which was the dining-room, smoking-room and barroom combined, as well as a storeroom for old junk of every description.

The landlord stamped around, dragging out broken-backed chairs and lighting half-a-dozen tallow candles, which he placed upon a table.

So far, not another human being had been seen about the place, which served to back up the story that Jesse James and his crew were being ferried over the creek. Probably the slaves of Durfie had not hurried about returning.

Higgins, who was secretly worried, tried to be unconcerned, but his glance roved around the room and, at last, he discovered a pile of oars and rowlocks in one corner.

This did not look as if many of the boats were in use, and it was another item to increase suspicion.

"How many horses hev yer got now, Durfie?" asked Perkins, who had seated himself at the table.

"Nine, and good ones, too! Want to buy one?" was the answer.

"No, but I'd like to steal one deuced well," was the answer. "We'll need three more as soon as them fellers upstairs get better."

The landlord chuckled and began rattling his bottles, and Perkins went on, in an indifferent manner.

"Come and set down, Durfie! We kin wait till some one comes to sarve us! I want yer opinion on which way Jess was goin' and whar you think he's likely ter be by daylight."

Durfie stamped across the floor and threw himself into a chair.

It occurred to Higgins at that minute that he should be taking a more active part in the conversation, so, after another sharp glance around, he sat down at the greasy table, while Cole dropped into a chair beside him.

"I ain't got any opinion of Jess James' doin's! He's beyond me, stranger! All I know erbout Jess is thet he's er holy terror thet ought ter be strung us as high as ther highest peak of the Big Horn yonder! But we won't wait no longer, gents. I'll do ther honors myself! Hang them lazy niggers! I'll cowhide the whole lot of them!"

"Some whisky and a bite to eat, my good man," said Higgins, quickly. "I've had a hard tramp to-day and could eat a fried mule if you had one."

Durfie started to rise and then changed his mind, and, in a second, it flashed through the detective's mind that he did not wish to give his guests a chance to discuss his appearance.

At that minute a shuffling step could be heard outside of the door and Durfie drew a revolver from his belt and pounded upon the table with the butt of it, at the same time roaring an order in a voice like thunder.

"Hi, thar, Bruce, you rascal! So you've got back at last, hev ye! Pity ye hadn't gone to ther bottom, ye lazy vagabond! Here, take ther gentleman's order fer whisky and a bite! Now, stir your stumps or I'll cowhide the life out of ye!"

As he spoke, a large, muscular-looking negro entered the room and gave a sharp look at the occupants.

He shuffled across the floor as if his shoes were several sizes too large for him, and, after stumbling over the pile of oars, came to a halt beside the detective.

Higgins tried to avoid looking at him too closely for fear of arousing suspicion.

He gave his order again after a word with the men, then, as the negro shuffled away, he rose from the table.

"I'll see what my friend wants in the way of grub," he said, carelessly.

An oath from the lips of his host made him stop abruptly.

"Sit down! We don't allow good fellows to leave us, eh, boys! Your friend is all right, and, by the eternal, hyar's yer whisky! Ther coon hez been spry fer once!"

He took a glass and bottle from the negro's hand as he spoke, and Higgins was obliged to sit down for fear of offending him.

Bruce deposited half-a-dozen glasses and a couple more bottles upon the table and left the room again with surprising alacrity.

"Now, gents, hyar's ther health of yer friends upstairs, and to yer success in comin' up with Jess James and his gang! Yer'll all drink ter that thar with er good will, I'm thinkin'!"

He raised a glass to his lips with his eyes upon Higgins.

The sheriff's men drained their liquor at a gulp, but the detective hesitated.

There was something in the eye of his host that made him uneasy.

"A drop of water there, you black rascal! The stuff is rank!" he grumbled, as he set down the tumbler.

Instantly the hand of his host clutched the butt of his pistol tighter.

"Ther stuff is all right! D—n yer airs, yer dandy! Who ther devil be yer not ter know good licker?"

Higgins looked him calmly in the eye, but his own hand crept to his belt as he replied:

"I'm glad you like the stuff if it is the best you've got, but I come from a country where they make genuine whisky! This stuff looks like blood and smells like the devil!"

"And you won't drink it!"

"No! I'll pay for it, though, if that's what's the matter!"

"Hang your money! The treat is on me! Now do you refuse to drink, you upstart!"

"Yes, I refuse, and all the bullying you can do won't change me," said Higgins, coolly. "Give me something that's fit to drink and I'll drink till daylight!"

The fellow had risen in his rage and was leaning over the table, and, at that minute, Perkins reached over and took the detective's tumbler.

"Do you hear that, gentlemen!" roared their host. "The fellow insults me by refusing my licker! For two cents I'd pitch him into the creek out yonder! He's a sneak and a spy, if he can't drink good whisky!"

"What the deuce is the matter with the stuff! You've drugged it, Durfie!" roared Perkins at that minute, as he sniffed at the glass. "You're in league with Jesse James and his gang of sneaks! Is that the way that you give strangers your protection?"

Every man at the table rose at the question and four pistols were drawn in a determined manner.

"It's a lie! Ther stuff is all right! Come here Bruce!" bawled the landlord.

The negro shuffled in and approached the table.

"Drink that, you black devil! I'll see whether you've been tamperin' with the stuff!" ordered the fellow. "Drain it to the dregs! I'll see if I am to be insulted by a white-livered tenderfoot!"

Higgins held his breath as he watched the outcome.

The negro had shrank back as the order sounded in his ears, and was already drawing himself up to resent the outrage.

"Drink it, curse you! What are you waiting for?" the fellow roared again.

The negro fairly paled, but he held out his hand for the tumbler.

"Now then, men, he mixed it, so he knows what it contains! Down with it, you knave, and then I'll settle with this fellow! No man shall refuse my licker without a taste of my bullets!"

Higgins still leaned upon the table with his eyes fixed upon the faces of the two men. If he had never seen hatred before, he saw it at that minute.

The sheriff's men were beginning to understand and their eyes wandered stealthily over the face and figure of their supposed landlord.

"Ther's dogs in ther kennel, Mars'r Durfie! Taint no wise squar ter try ther stuff on me," said the negro finally.

"Drink and shet yer jaw! Drink, I say!" roared the man, raising his weapon and leveling it squarely at the fellow.

"Hold on there, Durfie! Don't let yer temper git ther best of yer!" spoke Perkins, sternly. "If ther coon is suspicious, it speaks bad fer ther licker! 'Tain't fair ter kill one man when yer layin' fer another!"

"You hold yer tongue, Sam Perkins! I'm doin' this hyar! He poured ther stuff an' it's fer him ter test it! Now then, will yer drink it or not, you black devil!"

The muzzle of the weapon was aimed squarely at his heart now and one finger was already pressing the trigger.

The negro raised the glass to his lips and a smile spread over the ugly face of the host.

"Ha! Ha! I thought you'd think best not ter defy me!" he growled. "A word from me, and you'd be in ther hangman's noose. Ye'll find ther p'ison easier, if yer did poison ther licker!"

The weapon was lowered a trifle as the negro seemed to taste the contents of the glass, then, for just one fatal second the eyes of the infuriated man wandered away from the face of his victim.

Crash went the tumbler full of liquid squarely in his

face and, at the same time, the burly negro leaped at his throat.

There was a cry of rage and a volley of curses, then the two well-matched forms went down together.

"Stand by, men, and see fair play!" shouted Higgins, as he moved away a little distance.

"It's plain to be seen that they hate each other," muttered Perkins, as he followed the detective's example.

"Who the deuce is ther coon! He's er match fer Durfie, all right! Ther nigger's got him!"

"No, he ain't! Durfie is on top! Ther're well matched, all right! I'm puttin' er ten spot on Durfie as winner."

"And you'll win in a way that will surprise you, I'm thinking," said Higgins, as he was forced to move again to make room for the contestants. "Durfie is going to win, all right, but Durfie is the nigger!"

"What ther deuce?"

"That's right! It's Durfie! Hello, there goes his wool! Look, men! Did either of you ever see a red-headed nigger!" yelled Higgins. The men stared in amazement, for it was just as the detective said. The negro's wig of wool had come off in the tussle, exposing a shock of coarse red hair which every one in the county knew belonged to Durfie.

"Then who the deuce is t'other fellow?" asked Perkins, excitedly.

A yell from the negro announced that the battle was nearly ended. The bogus host had one knee in the pit of his stomach and had just gripped his throat in a desperate clutch.

The next second he drew a keen-edged bowie knife from his bootleg and flashed it before the fellow's eyes. In the heat of the moment, he had forgotten his audience completely.

Higgins dashed across the room and dropped upon one knee exactly in front of the bogus landlord.

"Drop that or you are a dead man," he said, sternly, "I've given you a fair fight, but I'll have no murders!"

The detective's revolver was in his hand.

At the same instant, the other looked up, and the detective started back in amazement as he beheld the scowling face of Jesse James.

CHAPTER IV.

PRISONERS.

Cornered as he was, the outlaw's nerve did not desert him.

There was a movement of the wrist so quick that it dazzled the eyes of the onlookers, then the knife left his hand and buried itself in the right arm of the detective.

With a groan Higgins dropped the revolver and half staggered to his feet and, at that instant, four men burst into the room and began a fusillade of death-dealing bullets.

Perkins only fired once, but his victim went down in company with himself and, a second later, Cole fell, pierced through the heart by an outlaw's bullet.

When Higgins regained consciousness, at last, he found himself entirely alone in the room and there was no sign of the struggle, nor any dead bodies.

He sat up and looked around with a dazed feeling in his mind, then, suddenly, he looked at his arm and found it had been carefully bandaged.

"Well, I'll be hanged if this isn't the most marveious proceeding on record," he muttered, aloud. "I seem to be all that is left of the scrap! What has happened?"

"Ha! Ha! What would you give to know?" asked a voice directly behind him.

A door opened and closed and some one came in and, as Higgins sprang to his feet, he gave a whistle of amazement.

The dwarf that he had met in the mountains at sunset was standing beside him.

"Hello! Where did you come from? I thought we winged you! Are you one of the cutthroat gang. If you are, now is your opportunity, for the cursed rascals have taken my pistol!" he said, calmly.

"Have a drink, stranger! We'll talk later," remarked the dwarf, going over to the bar and helping himself to a bottle of liquor.

Higgins seated himself in a chair, for he found that he was weaker than he thought and, as his companion poured out a stiff drink of fairly good rum, he swallowed it eagerly.

"Now I'll tell my story," began the fellow, "but first, is it the truth that you fellows are detectives?"

"Who said I was a detective?"

"Never mind who said it! Answer yes or no, or I don't go on with my story!"

Higgins thought a minute, but there seemed no reason for refusing to tell the truth, so he nodded his head and then awaited developments.

"And you are after Jesse James?"

Higgins nodded again.

"Then shake, young man. I'm your side partner in that deal. I'm after him, too, and by thunder I believe I've caught him!"

He lowered his voice as he spoke and his hand fell heavily upon the table.

There was a sincerity in his manner that was very convincing, even though there was much in his appearance to make one suspicious.

Higgins did some rapid thinking and then extended his hand.

"Tell me first of all, is my friend Venner safe? I left him upstairs with a bullet wound in his shoulder."

"He's all right. They're all right! The outlaw king keeps his word when he takes a notion to, and you can bet he don't let a detective or a sheriff die easy, if he can help it."

"You mean he has other reasons for offering us protection! Are we prisoners?" asked Higgins, quickly.

A leer that was intended for a smile distorted the fellow's features as he answered:

"The thing's right here, in a nutshell," he said, still in a guarded voice, "Jess and I were on the same lay to-night and I've got the best of him. I set the woods on fire myself as soon as I located him, then I followed the fire and got here behind him."

"I thought he did it."

The dwarf emitted a hoarse chuckle.

"He's lost two good horses in the blaze, bad luck to him! I'd have given a year's earnings if one of them had been Fleetwind!"

"Then Jesse James' horse escaped!"

"Yes! She cut loose and bolted. She's running loose in the mountains now and that was my lay, stranger! I was planning to steal that horse and Jess was trying to steal my two-year-old, Alberta!"

There was no mistaking the fellow's candor now, but a new perplexity was occupying the mind of the detective.

"What the deuce are you telling me this for?" he demanded. "I'm not interested in horse stealing!"

Higgins rose to his feet once more and attempted to move toward the door, but the click of a pistol hammer made him change his mind.

"You're to sit still, stranger," said the dwarf, with another leer. "I'm your jailer for to-night at the request of my friend, Durfie."

"Is Durfie alive?"

"Alive and kicking! He's got his orders from Jesse James. He's playing nurse up yonder!"

"You mean for my friend Venner?"

"Yes, and the other two. Jess figures they'll all three be on deck by this time to-morrow."

"Then what's in order?"

"I'll tell you later! Just keep easy, Mr. Sleuth! I'll be back in a jiffy!"

He darted through the door, closing and locking it before Higgins was half way across the floor.

The detective grasped the latch and shook with all his might, but he might as well have tried to pull down the building.

Then he examined the two windows in the room, but

they were barred with iron and the glass between the bars was so dirty that he could see nothing through it.

There was only one door leading to the inside of the building, but, of course, that was locked also.

The detective examined every inch of the floor and walls, and then sat down again none the wiser.

The whole thing was so complicated that he could not unravel it, but one thing was certain, Jesse James was in possession of the tavern. Durfie and the dwarf evidently hated the outlaw, but that they stood in fear of him was demonstrated by their actions.

Higgins was just wondering where the outlaw king found his extra men and horses, when a noise over his head attracted his attention. He looked up and saw a large spot in the smokey ceiling where the plaster was off and, at that minute the sharp blade of a knife was driven between the laths.

"Hello! That floor up there must be pretty rotten to admit of that!" he muttered, as he watched. "Now, that's a novel way to stab a man! I wonder if the rascal thinks he is going to scalp me!"

The knife blade was drawn back, after a minute, and a narrow saw inserted and, as Higgins riveted his eyes upon the spot, it suddenly occurred to him that a friend instead of an enemy was at work above him. He put his little finger to his lips and gave a low whistle.

It was answered in a second, and then the saw moved faster.

Higgins was growing excited now for fear the dwarf would come back too soon, but, after drawing the heavy bolts on both doors, he breathed a little easier.

"I'll be my own jailer for a few minutes," he whispered, and, just then, a piece of lath and plaster fell to the floor and was followed by a bowie knife that belonged to Venner. Higgins picked it up quickly and thrust it into his bootleg.

"Hello, Venner! Is that you?" he whispered softly.

"It's me, old man, and I guess I've done it this time! My wound has started bleeding again from using that saw, but I heard Durfie say you were a prisoner, and I couldn't stand it."

"Crawl back to bed and keep quiet, old man; but first, where is Durfie, I mean the genuine landlord?"

Venner chuckled as he answered: "He's in my bed with all my clothes on, and I've got him drugged with the stuff they left for me. Now, if I could only get out, there'd be a chance for us, old man! I'll tell you the details later. Just now I've got to do some thinking."

"Quick! Get away from the hole! My jailer is coming back!" warned Higgins, as he heard a step outside of the door.

He had just time to kick the piece of plaster into a

corner and unbolt the doors when some one put a key in the lock and shook the door vigorously.

Higgins dropped into a chair and leaned his injured arm upon the table when the door flew open and the dwarf stumbled in, cursing like a pirate.

"Ha! ha! So that's their game, is it!" he roared, as he drew the bolt. "They've left the bloodhounds to watch the tavern, and, curse the brutes, they all of them know me!"

"Then you have nothing to fear from them," said Higgins, quickly.

The dwarf fell into a chair and leered at him.

"Yes, they know me, but they hate me," he repeated, savagely. "Jess knows they'd tear me limb from limb if I attempted to leave the tavern!"

"So you are a prisoner, too!"

The dwarf rubbed his hands together and an angry light shot from his eyes.

"The game is in Jess James' hands so far," he said, angrily, "but he'll have a sweet time finding the horse-flesh he's after! I've hid them in a place where the devil couldn't find them!"

"You are sure that's what he's after?"

"Sure, my horses and his own. He's got a lot of horses that ain't worth their feed. He's got to have fresh ones to get out of Wyoming."

"How many dogs are there?"

"Eight, and they are demons, my friend. It would take eight men and eight bullets to settle the creatures."

"How many weapons have you?"

The dwarf looked suspicious.

"One, and I couldn't fire it to save my soul if those brutes were in front of me. I've been chased by the bloodthirsty creatures before! Don't you think I don't know 'em!"

A shudder of horror passed over his misshapen form and, in a second, Higgins was planning how to conquer the fellow. It was evident that the dwarf's dread of the bloodhounds amounted almost to superstition.

"What time will the gang get back," he asked, after a minute.

"At six o'clock, if they find the horses. If not, I'm to watch you until they return, if it ain't till doomsday."

"By whose orders?"

"Durfie's; he got his instructions from Jess, and that was one of them."

"And where is Durfie?"

"Gone with the gang. I'm the only well man in the tavern, and the dogs are outside of it, where I can't get a bead on them. You can't escape me and I can't escape the dogs! A deucedly fine situation, eh, Mr. Detective!"

Higgins had opened his eyes wide at the fellow's first statement, but it did not take him long to see that his

jailer had been tricked, too, in thinking Durfie was not there, and he began at once to work upon the fellow's feelings.

"Then our escape is easy!" he said, promptly. "What are you getting out of the jailer job? Wouldn't it pay you better to let the lot of us out? You'd have a chance, by that means, to save your horses."

"I tell you the horses are safe! He'll never find them!"

"Bah! Jesse James will find anything that is above the earth's surface! If you are afraid of the dogs, let me take your pistol! I'll tackle the whole pack and finish them, too, I promise you!"

The dwarf looked uneasy, and his face expressed the utmost terror.

"There's a good horse in this for me," he said, after a minute. "Durfie has promised me his best ye'rling if I keep you safe, and I'm a poor man, stranger—I need the creature!"

"Nonsense! You're a horse stealer and you've got a dozen or more good ones now that you'll get a handsome price for whenever you want to sell them, but, if it's Durfie's horse that you want, what's the matter with taking it! I'll kill the dogs and you must take me and my friends across the creek, then what's to hinder your coming back and taking the whole of the rascal's horses?"

The dwarf's eyes glistened at this suggestion, but the sudden growl of a bloodhound just outside of the door made his teeth begin to chatter, and weakened his nerve a little.

The dogs had broken down the barrier and were now just outside the door.

"Quick! Give me your gun! Don't be a fool!" said Higgins, sternly. "I'll pepper that beast from the window just to show you how easy it can be done!"

He held out his hand for the weapon as he spoke and the dwarf peered into his face eagerly.

"I'll trust you, stranger, but, curse you, if you trick me! I ain't a cutthroat like Jess James, but I'm a lover of vengeance! The man that plays me false has got to suffer!"

"Give me the 'pop' and shut up! We're losing our chance!" ordered Higgins.

The dwarf drew his revolver from his belt and the detective grabbed it.

The next minute he had picked up an oar-lock and thrust it through the glass. As the dog heard the crash he leaped for the window.

Crash! went a bullet through the creature's brain. With a howl of agony, it fell back and stretched out upon the ground as rigid as marble.

"There's one out of our way, now will you believe

me?" asked Higgins, as he calmly tucked the weapon into his pocket.

A knock on the inner door sounded just at that minute and, with a curse, the dwarf turned and attempted to bolt it.

"Stop! Draw that bolt and I'll shoot you!" roared Higgins, promptly, at the same time drawing a bead on the fellow with his own weapon.

The dwarf stamped with rage. He saw that the detective had turned the tables on him.

"Hello, Higgins! Let me in!" yelled Venner, from the other side of the door. "What the deuce is the matter, old man? Who fired that pistol?"

"Kick the door in, if you haven't any key!" shouted Higgins to the dwarf, "That is my friend, Mr. Venner. He's got a bullet hole in his shoulder, so he can't possibly hurt you!"

The dwarf did not move and Venner continued pounding, and Higgins put his finger on the trigger in a decidedly businesslike manner. "Now, then, your choice! Open that door or out you go to the dogs! I'm the jailer now, you knave, so speak quick! Which is it?"

Another growl outside of the door showed that a second bloodhound had sought the spot, then came a series of yelps and a chorus of howls and snarlings.

"They've found their mate and got a smell of fresh blood, so they'll make short work of you if I chuck you out now! One, two!—will you open that door? At three, your fate is settled!"

The dwarf stopped cursing and drew a key from his pocket.

As he opened the door, he jumped back with a yell of terror.

Venner had dressed himself in the landlord's clothes, even to the red wig that Jesse James had worn while he was acting that *rôle* early in the evening.

"Hello! Who the devil is this?" blustered out Venner, as he caught sight of the dwarf. "Great Scott! If it isn't the lunatic horse stealer we met in the mountains! Blow his brains out, Higgins, and don't waste any time about it! I want you to tie another rag around my shoulder."

The dwarf gave another yell that drowned out the dogs completely, and then all three stood still and bent their heads to listen, for the sound of hoofbeats could be heard coming rapidly toward the tavern.

"It's Jesse James himself," whispered Higgins, as he peered through the broken window. "Here! Take a look at him, you rascal, and see if that's your horse! There's five men and seven horses——"

The dwarf did not let him finish.

He had forgotten his terror long enough to fix his eye at the window and one glance was enough to turn

all his fury against the outlaw, for Jesse James had not only recovered his own horse, Fleetwind, but he had the two-year-old, Alberta.

In a second the man's nature had changed like magic.

"Curse the scoundrel. I'll have his blood!" he muttered, savagely. "Let him attempt to enter the tavern! I'll brain him with an oar if you miss him, detective!"

He shouldered one of the heavy oars as he spoke and, tossing his belt to Higgins, took up his station behind the door.

Higgins passed his revolver to Venner while he re-bandaged his wound, and all three listened carefully, while the outlaw gang drove the dogs back to their kennels.

"Let them come!" muttered the dwarf again, as he glared at the door. "I'll spill the brains of the first man that steps over that threshold!"

There was a light step on the stairs and the other two injured men entered, one of them carefully closing and bolting the door behind him.

Venner glanced at him questioningly and the fellow nodded his head and made a motion across his throat.

He intended the detective to understand that Durfie's career was ended.

This left the four men in possession of the tavern, with Jesse James and four of his gang about to demand admission.

CHAPTER V.

THE BATTLE.

Higgins was at the window before the horse stealers began their attack, and he and Venner had both fortified themselves with a stiff glass of liquor.

"Now then, my man, be ready to answer their signals," he said, to the dwarf, "for, of course, you arranged some before they left the tavern, didn't you?"

The dwarf nodded his head. He was loyal enough now. The fact that Jesse James had succeeded in finding his pet horse had turned him into a demon.

Higgins did not command a view of the door, but he was able to find a range in several directions, but, as the party of outlaws advanced from the stables, they halted at an angle of the building and took a sharp look at the windows.

By placing his ear to the broken pane, Higgins could hear their conversation distinctly, and he was more than ever impressed with the cleverness of the robbers.

"There's one dog missing! Now, then, where is the brute?" said Jesse James. "Call the hound, Hawk! He knows your voice! They mind me all right, but Danger was your favorite."

A low call followed, then came a series of whistles,

then the half-breed whom Jesse James had addressed glanced sharply toward the window.

"There he is, Jess! The critter is lyin' yonder near the winder! He's as dead as a log! No wonder he didn't answer."

"Who the devil did it?" growled the outlaw. "Those sleuth-hounds had no weapons!"

"It was Humpy, I'll bet! He's afraid of the dogs," said Jake Turner's voice. "He must have taken a shot at the beast from the window."

"When he ought to have been saving his bullets for those detectives," growled Jesse James, "but hold on a minute till I give the signal."

Three long, shrill whistles followed this remark and the dwarf, with a hideous grin, gave back the signal promptly.

"That'll bring him on to his doom," he muttered, savagely. "He'll think everything is all right and that I'm cock of the roost!"

"So you shall be, if you serve us faithfully," said Higgins, softly, "but here they come! Now let them batter down the door if they want to!"

The two remaining men of the sheriff's posse seemed to have forgotten their wounds, for one of them had armed himself with an oar and was standing opposite the dwarf, while the other was busily piling up a lot of bottles and glasses noiselessly upon the table.

"I'm a pretty good shot," he whispered, as Higgins looked at him inquiringly. "If I git anything like a show, I may be able to brain one on 'em."

Higgins had already placed the candles so that the window was in darkness, and he now bent his ear to the shattered pane again to catch more of the conversation.

The party of outlaws had reached the door and, finding it locked, they began kicking the panels and cursing.

"Hello, inside there! Humpy! Where the deuce are you, you rascal! Open the door! Open, I say, and be quick about it!"

There was not a sound from those inside, and one of the outlaws moved toward the window and almost within range of the detective's weapon.

"Hold on there, Bill! Go easy!" warned Frank James. "The fellow may have turned traitor! I haven't much faith in Durfie!"

"No fear of that! Durfie wouldn't dare! There's a price on his head in Custer County and I could claim it to-morrow by sending the sheriff his dead body."

The two detectives and the sheriff's men glanced at each other at this bit of information, but the dwarf was fairly biting his own fingers to keep from yelling curses at the outlaws.

"I tell you there's something wrong, Jess!" said Frank

James, again. "As like as not, Humpy and Durfie have got their heads together and planned some treachery."

"Then why did they answer my signal?" asked Jesse James, furiously. "That was Humpy's whistle and he's in charge of one of those detectives. There were only two men in the place with a weapon on their persons, the others were unarmed and injured. A nice crew for treachery!"

"Then why don't they let us in?"

"I'll find out before long! Hello! Open this door or I'll smash it off the hinges! I'll give you till I count ten! If it isn't opened by that time I'll open it myself, and I promise you two traitors I'll show no quarter!"

The dwarf chuckled audibly as he heard the threat, and, at that minute, Higgins caught sight of a dark form creeping slowly toward the window.

Crash!

Bang!

A bullet from his revolver struck the jagged edge of glass and the dark form dropped to the ground by the side of the bloodhound.

Higgins had just time to draw back when a shower of leaden hail came through the window, shattering the remaining glass to atoms and making the iron bars vibrate.

"H—I and fury!" shouted Jess, outside the door, while he rained a volley of kicks upon the heavy panels. The door fell with a crash, barely missing the dwarf, and, as Jesse James and his men dashed into the room, they sent a fusillade of bullets in every direction.

Then crash, crash, crash, went bottles and glasses against their heads and the revolver in the detective's hands added five explosions to the racket.

The dwarf's oar had descended twice, when he went down in a heap. Then, with a final roar of their weapons, what was left of the outlaw gang turned and rushed for the stables.

"After them, Higgins!" yelled Venner, who had completely forgotten his wound, "I'm sure I hit Jesse James once! I must finish the fellow!"

"Hold on!" answered Higgins, firmly, as he caught his friend by the arm; "they may have good weapons on them, then we'll save our strength for the next encounter!"

They drew the bodies of the dwarf and two of the outlaws into the tavern, and then the four injured men together set the door back in position.

"There's no use! It won't stay! The hinges are clean busted!" said one of the sheriff's men. "If we could get one of those boats and get over the creek! There's a place in the woods on the other side where we would have them at our mercy!"

Higgins had robbed the two dead bodies of a brace

of pistols apiece and, unbuckling their belts, he helped himself to ammunition.

"It's strange they don't come back," said Venner, going close to the window.

As he spoke, there was a clatter of hoofbeats and three horsemen dashed around the corner of the tavern and disappeared in an instant.

"They've abandoned the fight for the present! Now what is their game? Can they reinforce their number in this section of the country?" asked Higgins.

The sheriff's man shook his head, as he fastened on one of the belts.

"These woods are full of horse thieves and outlaws of all kinds, and you can bet Jess knows them all! Our play is to cross the creek and be quick about it! There's no use to stay here! Jess may set fire to the building!"

"By thunder! I believe he's done it already!" yelled Venner, as a great burst of smoke suddenly filled the room.

"Quick! Grab the oars and bolt! There's fire in the cellar! Yes, by the eternal, men, there's fire all around us!"

He opened the doors leading upstairs as he spoke and another cloud of smoke poured into the room, then a flash of fire suddenly swept across the ceiling.

The men grabbed an oar apiece and a pair of rowlocks and, leaving the dead men to their cremation, made a rush for the turbulent water of the creek which was a few rods distant.

Hank Davis, one of the sheriff's men, led the way to the ford and the whole party arrived upon the bank just in time to see three horsemen emerging from the water upon the other side.

"By Jove; They've swam over with their horses! Where are the boats?" cried Higgins.

A shout from Jesse James was followed by a peal of mocking laughter, and the four men could see the outlaw pointing to a couple of dark objects some distance down the stream.

"There go your boats! You'll have to swim as we did!" shouted the outlaw. "Cold water will do your bullet-wounds good, and you'll be in better shape to fight when we meet a little later!"

"We haven't done so badly for cripples as it is!" answered Higgins, boldly, at the same time taking careful aim at the figure on the opposite bank.

"Don't waste your bullets, old man! They are saving theirs!" warned Venner. "The creek is wider than it looks. Wait, you heard him say we would meet later!"

Higgins dropped his arm without discharging his weapon and, with another shout, Jesse James and his three remaining followers disappeared in the shadows.

Higgins looked at the sky. It was almost morning.

The tavern was blazing merrily now, and they had shelter.

To the best of his knowledge there was not another house of any kind for twenty miles that side of the creek and there seemed no way at present of crossing the angry water.

Suddenly a yell that sounded almost human came to their ears and showed them that there was still some horses left in the stable.

"Quick! The stables are on fire and there are horses in it! If we can save them, we are safe ourselves. Hurry, men! It's our only hope in this dilemma."

The buildings were near the house and the roof was blazing, but the brave fellows rushed in and led out the horses.

There was one apiece and one to spare, and Higgins fastened the odd one firmly to his saddle and led it away with the others.

"Now, then, we'll follow the bandit king's example. We'll swim across!" he said, decidedly. "Fortunately not one of us have wounds below our belts, so if we are careful the horses will take us over without much of a wetting."

"Is the current strong?" asked Venner. "I mean, too strong for the horses."

"No, but the water is deep. That's the only danger."

"So much the easier for swimming. They're Durfee's horses, so they are used to it! Come on, men! My horse rather likes it!" cried Higgins, who was leading.

The dogs, locked up in their kennels, must take their chances. They had neither time nor taste for bloodhounds under the present circumstances.

Getting the horses out and saddling them had taken a few minutes, so, when the men reached the opposite bank, the outlaws had vanished. The road on the other side was fairly well traveled and, as it was growing rapidly light, there was no trouble in tracing the outlaws.

A ride of a mile through the woods brought them to a good hard cross road and, as the outlaws had turned to the right, which was the way they wished to go, the little party halted a minute.

"We are in no shape to meet them. We are all shivering with cold," said Venner. "Suppose we abandon the chase and find a spot to rest in! The sun is coming up, and we can build a fire and dry our clothes. Perhaps we can even catch a jack-rabbit for breakfast."

"A good idea! We'll turn to the left. Are you sure you know where it leads to, Davis?" asked Higgins.

The sheriff's man wheeled his horse so as to take the lead.

"I know the road. There's a hut down here apiece where we can rest as long as we want to. It's made of stone, and there's only one door and one window.

The only danger is, they'll storm us like rats in a trap, if they ever trace us."

"We've got to risk it! Come on!" said Higgins, decidedly.

Hank took another look at the road leading to the right.

"There's no mistake, they've gone that way," he muttered. "Now, I'll bet I know what the rascals are up to. There's a stock farm two miles farther on that's owned by a woman. Ten to one the robbers are after some of her horses!"

"Will they harm the woman?" asked Venner, quickly.

The galloping hoofbeats of a horse coming from that direction seemed to answer him and, as the men turned their heads, they gasped with astonishment.

A beautiful girl of seventeen was coming down the road like the wind. Her horse, a noble, coal-black animal, seemed to be fairly flying.

"Help! Help!" she cried, the minute she caught sight of the group. "Quick! There are robbers at the ranch! Come and save us, gentlemen! Do not hesitate a minute! My mother will reward you handsomely!"

Before she had half finished, both Higgins and Venner were at her side.

"Is Jesse James among them?" asked Venner, quickly.

The girl threw up both arms and gave a shriek.

"Oh! I had not thought of that. I believe it was Jesse James. He is a big, strong-looking man, with eyes like an eagle's, and there is another fellow among them that looks like him a little!"

"It's the James gang! We're after them, but we are all wounded," began Venner. "Still we must go on! What do you say, men?"

"Go on!" cried the men, promptly.

"But if you are really injured and suffering——" began the girl.

"I have forgotten my wound since you burst upon us," said Higgins, promptly. "Lead the way, miss, please, and we will do our best, whatever that may be! I only wish, for your sake, that we were all in better condition."

He gave her a glance of admiration as he spoke that made her white lids fall before his gaze, then she wheeled her horse around to cover her confusion.

"Now, then, ride for your lives!" yelled Venner, looking back over his shoulder at the two men, "and may our lucky star be with us, boys!"

The five horses swept like the wind along the level stretch of woodland until they neared the boundary line of one of Wyoming's loneliest stock farms.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW ENEMY.

"By thunder! We're too late! There they go, with Jesse James in the lead!" yelled Venner, as the party galloped around the corner of a long, low building which accommodated a fair-sized drove of horses. They had come in sight of the ranchhouse and stables, which were located in a level space between two knolls, and were just in time to see the outlaws galloping up the opposite hill, leading four thoroughbred horses and a magnificent stallion.

"Oh, the robber! He has taken Silver Heels! Where in the world are all the stable men?" cried the young girl, as she spurred her horse toward the front of the main building.

The detectives kept close at her side, but they could not outride her, and, before they reached the door, the band of outlaws had disappeared entirely. The young girl was scanning the buildings eagerly, and her companions did the same, but, although it was broad daylight, there was not a soul to be seen anywhere on the premises.

"That is strange! Jack was here, and Tom and Pete," she said, anxiously. "Oh, what shall I do if they have murdered mother!"

She pulled up her horse as she spoke and Venner sprang to the ground to help her alight, but she slid gracefully from the saddle before he could reach her, and darted into the house.

"Hello! There's the first victim!" cried Higgins, as he caught sight of a man's body lying across the wide hall.

"It's Burt Bangs! They shot him just as I was mounting Beppo at the rear door," said the girl, as she stepped over the body.

"Burt was the first to see the robbers, and he told me to go for help. You see, our men are out on the mountains just now, rounding up the cattle, and the ranch is short-handed."

She threw open a door of one of the living-rooms as she spoke, and the next instant a shriek of alarm burst from her rosy lips.

"Oh, mother! mother! Have they hurt you?" she cried, and the next instant she was kneeling by the side of a fine-looking woman, who was stretched out upon a wooden "settle."

There was a gag in the woman's mouth, and her hands were tightly bound, but the young girl was only a second in restoring her to her liberty.

"Have they gone?" whispered the poor woman, as soon as she got her breath.

"Yes, and they have taken Silver Heels and four of

the horses! It was Jesse James and his gang! These gentlemen are after them, and they would have gone right on, only they are all badly wounded!"

"Wounded! How?" asked the lady, rising quickly to her feet.

Higgins stepped forward and explained the situation.

"Let the horses go, then! We can do without them! And now, gentlemen, if you will look over the ranch and count my dead, Isabel and I will get you some breakfast."

The detectives stared at this display of courage, for the woman had every appearance of being ill from rough treatment.

"Yes, do go! Look over the stables and behind the corral. There were five men on the place last night, and I have only seen one this morning," cried Isabel.

Venner and Higgins went back to the door where they had left the other two men with the horses and, after a minute's conversation, the horses were put in one of the stables and the search for the missing ranchmen began.

In all they found four men, three dead and one badly injured. The fifth man, a Mexican "puncher," by the name of Miguel, was missing.

"By Jove! I know where he is! He went with the gang!" said Higgins, suddenly. "Jesse James had only two men with him when they crossed the creek, and there were three besides himself as they disappeared with the horses."

"Then Miguel was a traitor! I have thought so all along!" said the young girl, hotly. "He must have expected the outlaws and arranged everything for them. That explains how they happened to choose the very best horses!"

Dan Purdy, the one living ranchman on the place, was able to tell them something after a bullet wound in his leg had been dressed.

"That cursed Mexican got us up at daybreak to look after a horse that had sickened in the night, and the whole bunch, except Burt, was in the critter's stable when them outlaw devils burst in on us," he said, angrily. "Burt must hev gone to ther front door jest in time to git a bullet in his head, and then the whole gang was in ther stable when I heard Miss Isabel tearin' out of ther yard on Beppo. There was such a racket in ther stable that no one noticed it but me, or, if they did, they didn't pay no attention."

"So they are all dead but you! Poor fellows!" sighed the owner of the ranch, whose name was Mrs. Archer. "And I have heard enough to know that they all died bravely."

"You was all-fired brave yerself, Mrs. Archer," said the man. "Great snakes, but I was scart when I see yer

comin' toward ther stable a-flourishin' yer revolver! And yer winged one on 'em, too! He rode away groanin'!"

"Did you shoot at them, mother? Oh, I wish I had stayed! I might have killed one of the robbers!" cried the daughter.

"I'm glad you didn't, dear! It was too frightful!" was the answer. "But I will say that the leader of the gang was merciful. He did not let them hurt me!"

"That was Jesse James himself. He never harms a woman, they say, but it was bad enough for him to gag and bind you, madam. I shall remember that deed if I ever meet him again," said Venner.

"I shall pray that you may never meet him again! The man is a monster!" was the anxious answer.

"But I want to meet him!" laughed the detective. "I've come all the way from St. Louis for that very purpose."

"I know where they are bound for," said Dan Purdy. "They're goin' ter hold up a train on ther Northern Pacific at Dead Man's Ditch. It's ther worst spot on earth! I reckon they'll rob hundreds, and murder 'em, too, most likely."

While this conversation was going on, Isabel had brought in the breakfast, and the men, who were suffering terribly from their wounds, in spite of their courage, were glad to partake of something hot and refreshing.

"Ther hold-up is ter be on Friday night, and this hyar is Tuesday," went on Dan, after a little thought. "I've heard that Mexican hintin' at it fer a week, and now I kin put two an' two tergether. The dago has j'ined the outlaw gang and is goin' ter help them."

"Hyar comes ther boys!" yelled Dan Purdy at that minute.

The others listened intently, and soon his words were verified.

A curious sound was being wafted to their ears, and for a minute the two detectives, who were unused to the country, were inclined to think that an earthquake was approaching. The ground trembled and the ranchhouse shook as if it was in a fit of ague, and the cloud of dust that swept by the small windows served to intensify the delusion.

"It's the cattle! The cowboys are coming! Oh, what a pity they didn't get in last night!" cried Isabel.

They all hurried to the door except Dan, who was too lame to walk.

Herd after herd of cattle, horses and sheep surrounded the ranch. There seemed to be armies of them, coming from all directions.

Then the voices of the cowboys could be heard as they shouted to each other or yelled like demons at some refractory creature.

The animals belonged to various ranches, and, as they were being singled out and separated from each other, the excited creatures swept nearer and nearer.

"Oh, dear! If they had only run across that outlaw gang and brought Silver Heels back!" cried Miss Archer, as she watched them.

Higgins was standing at her side, gazing at her admiringly, and he made haste to move nearer and murmur softly in her ear:

"You shall have him back, if it is in the power of man to get him, Miss Archer."

A rush of rosy color mounted to her cheeks, and the young girl gave him a look that made his heart beat like a trip hammer.

"You must not risk your life, though, to save the stallion," she said, sweetly, "for if you were killed, I should feel that I was your murderer!"

One of the wildest of the army of steers now separated itself from the drove, and charged straight for the door of the ranchhouse, where the group was standing.

Higgins threw his uninjured arm around Isabel to draw her back, and as he did so a yell from one of the cowboys made him hesitate a minute.

"Hi, thar! Whoop! Hurray! Git back thar, you renegade!"

A magnificent specimen of true Western type, mounted on a fiery bronco, had suddenly galloped after the steer, and, as he yelled his warning, there was a swish and whirr of a lariat and a rope circled and fell over the creature's horns, and he was brought to the dust in the space of a second.

Higgins had forgotten to remove his arm from Isabel's waist, and, as he joined in the cheer that followed, the cowboy coiled his lariat carefully and galloped up to the ranchhouse.

He had turned the steer back toward the drove, and was now glaring at Higgins, and there was a look in his eyes that would have alarmed a less nervy man than the detective.

"Break away, there, old man! That fellow don't like it!" whispered Venner, cautiously.

Higgins understood at once, but he did not move, and at that minute Mrs. Archer called to the angry cowboy and told him what had happened.

Isabel moved discreetly from the detective's arm and went out in the yard and stood beside her mother.

She had seen the look that Buck Franklin, the cowboy, had bestowed upon the strange young man and, in spite of her admiration for the detective's courage, she could not help feeling a little nervous.

Buck had been her lover for nearly a year, and, as he possessed a revengeful disposition, she had good reason for her nervousness.

The cowboy now went on with the drove, and for the next few hours all was excitement on the ranch, for the cowboys were busy branding and looking over the live stock.

The next day the poor fellows who had met death at the hands of Jesse James and his gang were buried.

Isabel and her mother took good care of the wounded men and, while far from well, on Friday they again took up the interrupted chase after the outlaws.

The attempt was now an organized attack, and each detail was looked into and understood by all of them.

Buck Franklin, the cowboy, was to act as guide, as he knew every inch of the country, and two other cowboys joined forces with the detectives and their companions. This made a party of seven, all mounted upon fresh horses and splendidly equipped with weapons and ammunition.

They were determined to frustrate the train-robbing scheme, if possible, and to capture the outlaws, but both Buck and Higgins had another motive. They were each determined to bring back the stallion, and so win the affection of the beautiful Isabel.

CHAPTER VII.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the little party of horsemen, with Buck Franklin in the lead, arrived at one of the loneliest spots on the line of the Northern Pacific Railroad.

There was no moon, and the sky was overcast with clouds, making the shadows of the rocks and trees look even blacker and more threatening.

One of the cowboys, armed with a red lantern, separated himself from the group, and, with a last word of instruction from Buck, made his way along the track, hoping to stop the train at a good distance above the spot designated by Purdy as the locality of the coming hold-up.

"Move keerfully, Sam, and remember that Jesse James has eyes like a hawk," warned Buck. "If he so much as sees yer shadder, there'll be a bullet in yer heart."

"But if you outwit him, there'll be a hundred to bless you," put in Venner, quickly. "Everything depends on you, my man!"

"I'll do it, or die a-tryin'!" muttered the brave fellow, as he rode off, leaving the rest of the band to their part in the proceeding.

"Halt! We're near enough! We'd best reconnoitre a bit!" said Buck, after a few minutes more of riding. "You go ahead up the track a little way, Ben, and see if any of the rails are loose, while I take a look down nearer the ditch."

"Where the deuce does the track go to, anyhow? It looks as if it ran plump into the rocks up yonder!" said Higgins, as he peered carefully ahead and saw Ben disappear as if the bowlders had swallowed him.

"There's a cut through them rocks, an all-fired narrer one, I admit," answered Buck. "The robbers must mean ter wait till ther train comes through there, I reckon, then they kin swing a lantern hyar in the open space, an', if she don't slow down, they kin ditch her in ther chasm below."

"How deep is the ditch?"

"Only about twenty feet at this end, but it runs down gradual till it's nigh on ter a hundred."

"That would mean death to every man, woman and child on board," said Venner, soberly, "and the robbers could have a picnic plundering the dead and living."

"Jess don't usually kill unless he has to, and I reckon she'll slow down, all right," said Buck. "Jess usually makes 'em all mind him. He'll swing a red lantern like all possessed, and ther train slows down a bit, anyhow, when she runs between ther bowlders. It's as dark as a pocket, and ther engineer has ter go keerful."

"What time is the express due?"

"Half-past one, kerzackly."

"Are you sure this is the only place where such a deed could be executed?"

"It's Dead Man's Ditch, all right!"

Buck rode down the track some distance, and came back softly.

"There's nothin' wrong yet, but, then, we're hyar early. Now, I reckon we'd best hide and keep still a while. If them fellers show up, we want ter remember ther signals. Wait till they git into a bunch, as they're dead sure to when they find ther train's been stopped up yonder, then shoot them down without a word, every man his mark and no trespassin', gentlemen!"

"That means that you are reserving Jesse James for yourself, I suppose," laughed Higgins.

"Shoot ther outlaw yerself, then, if yer want ter!" retorted the cowboy. Then he leaned from his saddle and glared savagely at Higgins.

"Blaze away at ther outlaw all yer like, Mr. Detective! Riddle him with bullets, for all I care, but lay a hand on that horse and you're a dead man!"

"You mean Silver Heels, I suppose."

"That's ther stallion's name! We'll hev no words over it now, but, remember, if ye lay a hand on thet thar horse, ye do it at yer peril!"

Higgins laughed good-naturedly, for he admired the man's courage, but there was a light in his eyes that showed his resentment.

Just then a suspicious sound in the distance made them stop and listen.

Ben had come back from his tour of inspection, and reported nothing wrong, and, a moment later, both horses and men were safely concealed in the bushes on either side of the roadbed.

Then the clatter of hoofs could be heard distinctly coming down the track, and the detectives strained their eyes and ears to see and hear distinctly.

Sam could not possibly have advanced more than a quarter of a mile up the track, and they were naturally anxious to know if the outlaws had discovered him.

If they had, he was a dead man now, and the rest of them were in danger, for, being sure of the presence of one man on the spot, the outlaws would be shrewd enough to guess that there were others.

In a very few minutes this nerve tension was relaxed, for the first words of the outlaws showed that Sam had eluded them.

The voice of Jesse James was the first that greeted their ears, for, believing no one near, the bandit king was reckless.

He was riding a little in advance of the others, and calling back to them over his shoulder.

"Now, then, Hawk! Spur up a little! There's a spot ahead where you can loosen a rail and tip her over easy!"

"What's the use ditching the train, anyhow, Jess? We'll stop her all right!" called another voice, which both of the detectives recognized as belonging to Frank James.

"I've said what I'll do, and that's enough!" growled the outlaw. "Hawk and Three Fingers can wait at the ditch, and, if the train stops, all right; they can put back the spikes in a jiffy. All they've got to do is to listen for my signal. I'll make it three whistles, good shrill ones, and, when the spikes are in, they can give them back to me. I'll hold the train until I git the signal; that is, if that cussed idiot of an engineer decides to stop for me!"

"He'll never dare to disobey a red light, Jess."

"I ain't so sure! He's got an inkling that I'm in this part of the country, and his job is at stake. Hank is the stubbornest man in the employ of the railroad. He'd rather ditch the train himself than have me go through it."

The outlaw chuckled as he spoke, and the others roared with laughter.

It was too dark to see them distinctly, but the men in hiding could judge by their voices that there were nearly a dozen altogether.

"Where the deuce do they spring from?" whispered Higgins to Venner, as they stood holding their horses by the noses to keep them quiet.

"Hark! Jess is giving more orders!" was Venner's only answer.

A light mist was falling now, which rendered the darkness more obscure, and the men could not see even the outlines of the robbers, and had to depend solely for their location on the sound of their voices.

"Here, Jim!" called the outlaw, "you and the nigger want to be ready to go through the sleepers. Frank and I will attend to the engineer and fireman, and Mike and Lightning Eye must tackle the express messengers and throw out the boodle. There are two of them aboard, so they'll probably make things lively. The rest of you can attend to the train hands and conductors. Put on your masks, and, remember, this is to be a clean job and a quick one! Fleece every man in the lot, but don't touch the women. You can make them shell out easy enough!"

"All right, Jess!" came a chorus of voices, and then Frank James must have suddenly discovered that a man was missing, for he reported the fact to his brother.

"What? The Mexican not here! What can have become of the fellow? I'll make a target of him if he dares to play the coward!"

"Hello ahead!" yelled a voice up the track at that minute, and an angry voice began rolling out Mexican curses.

Buck and Ben recognized the voice instantly, and the others were able to guess that it belonged to the treacherous ranchman.

Jesse James turned his horse's head and moved a few paces.

"What are you lagging for?" he asked, sternly. "Keep along with the rest, if you want to stay in this gang, you loafer!"

"Hold on, Captain Jesse! I've got some news for you!" called the Mexican in answer, and the men behind the trees caught one solitary flash from a red lantern.

"Confusion! Where'd you get that?" roared the outlaw king.

The Mexican urged his horse forward and lowered his voice a little, while the men behind the trees held their breath to listen.

"They're after you, Jess! The boys from the ranch, I mean! I just slit Sam Selden's windpipe for swingin' this hyar lantern!"

There was a gasp of horror from the men behind the trees, but Jesse James began cursing like a pirate.

"Where are the rest of them, then? Did he tell?" he asked, furiously.

"He swears he came alone! Them was his dyin' words," was the answer.

Jesse James did not speak for a minute, and the men behind the trees breathed easier.

Sam had died like a hero, if he could do nothing better, but it remained to be seen if Jesse would believe it.

"He swore he was lookin' for a runaway critter, and fetched the red lantern by mistake. That's all I could get out of him afore I slit his gullet!"

"Where'd you leave him?" asked the outlaw, in a quieter tone.

"On the track, of course! Where should I leave him?"

There was another moment of silence, and then the outlaw gave an order.

"He may have spoken the truth, and he may not. Keep your eyes and ears open, men, and don't let anything fool you. If there's any one hereabouts that wants me, let 'em come out and take me!"

The last was said in a pompous voice, but there was no response, and, a minute later, the outlaws scattered in all directions.

Buck Franklin was raging over the Mexican's deed, and every man behind the trees was eager to get at the fellow and avenge the death of their brave companion.

Nothing could avert the hold-up now, unless, as Jesse James had hinted, the engineer refused to stop, and, in that event, a calamity too awful to describe must certainly follow.

Five minutes later the sound of pick and crowbar could be heard down the track, which showed those in hiding that the prince of outlaws was in desperate earnest.

The time dragged slowly, and every minute increased the nervousness of those in ambush, for it was only by the greatest effort that they could keep their horses quiet.

The animals belonging to the outlaws whinnied now and then, and the other horses seemed frantic to answer them.

If one of them had done so, it would have precipitated a battle, and, as they were outnumbered almost two to one, they preferred to wait until they had some advantage in their favor.

At last the distant rumble of the express could be heard, and once more Jesse James began yelling his orders.

Then a flash of red light could be seen up the track, and, for just a second, Higgins caught sight of two men, wearing black masks over the upper part of their faces. Then a clump of bushes hid them completely.

On came the train, thundering toward the curve, with its long cars filled to overflowing with unsuspecting passengers.

Once around the curve, the engineer would see the red light, and, if he dared to disobey it, in five minutes the train would be lying at the bottom of the chasm.

The detectives tried not to think of this possible result,

but waited with every nerve strained to prevent the threatened catastrophe.

The noise of the approaching train was deadened as it entered the cut between the gigantic rocks; then, with a rush and a roar, it came thundering through the pass, with its headlight flaming like the fiery eye of a demon.

In a second every man in ambush had vaulted to his saddle.

Would the train stop at the signal?

This was the all-important question.

CHAPTER VIII.

JESSE JAMES AT THE THROTTLE.

A shriek of the whistle was followed by the grinding of brakes, and, as the locomotive stopped with a jerk, a brace of pistols was forced into the faces of the engineer and fireman.

"A move and you are dead men!" roared Jesse James. "Now, men, do your work quickly, and do it well. Crack the safe, if it is necessary, and throw out the treasure!"

A dozen masked men sprang forward at his order.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

The pistols of the outlaws spoke merrily, and, at that very minute, the detectives and their companions sent a volley at the robbers.

"At them, men! Down with Jesse James and his cut-throats!" yelled Higgins, and a perfect fusillade of bullets whistled around the heads of the robbers.

Fired upon from the outside rather than from the inside, the bandits were taken by surprise, and, as they turned to get a look at their assailants, it gave the trainmen and passengers a chance to draw their weapons.

Venner lost no time in giving three shrill whistles, as a signal for the two men at the ditch to put back the spikes; then he joined in the fray from the other side of the engine, just as the sheriff's men rode around the rear of the train to surprise the bandits in that direction.

Crack!

Bang!

Thud!

The bullets flew like rain, but the headlight of the engine confused their sight, and the leaden hail did little damage.

The bandits, finding themselves between two fires, were fighting like demons, some of them from their horses' backs, while others had dismounted.

The express messengers poured deadly fire from the door of the express compartment, while all along the line of cars brave men, and even women, leaned from the windows and snapped all sorts of weapons, while the

cry, "It's Jesse James! Kill the robber!" rose from all sides and seemed to increase the confusion.

After what seemed an age to Venner, his signal was answered by the men at the ditch, and, as the cab of the locomotive was now empty, he began yelling at the engineer and telling him to go forward.

Trainmen, outlaws and passengers darted here and there between the cars, and, in the excitement and darkness, Venner singled out a man whom he thought was Jesse James, and fired point blank at him.

The man went down, and Higgins called again for the engineer to go forward, at the same time emptying his revolver at a figure that had skulked behind one of the outlaws' horses.

"Go ahead! We'll hold the outlaws! Take your train out of harm's way!" yelled Higgins, at the top of his lungs.

Two men climbed into the cab, and one of them put his hand upon the throttle.

The next instant the engine snorted, and, with a few puffs, was off into the darkness.

Pistols still cracked, and, as the train sped on, there was a general scrambling of the contestants to cover, while the horses stampeded in every direction.

Higgins had gained the protection of a clump of bushes, and now lay flat upon the ground, and in five minutes after the last shot was fired all was as silent as the grave, except for the distant rumble of the train and a faint whinnying of the horses.

The minutes dragged slowly, but no one stirred. Neither the outlaws nor their enemies dared to creep from cover.

Finally Higgins felt the bushes near him move, and a minute later a whisper reached his ears.

It was Venner, unharmed, but destitute of weapons.

"Sh! Softly, old man! Lord only knows who is near us!" warned Higgins. "Have you seen or heard anything of Buck?"

"No, I haven't. But, hello! Look out on the track! There are four dead bodies, if I am not mistaken! Perhaps one of them is Jesse James! I got a bead on him once!"

"So did I, or, at least, I thought I did. But suppose they're not dead! I hate to leave them until I am sure."

"Then let's go and see," said Venner, promptly.

The two glided from the bushes and advanced boldly to the track, expecting every minute to feel the sting of a bullet.

"Here's poor Ben! He's as dead as a door-nail!" said Higgins, as he reached the first body.

"This is one of the outlaws. He's got on his mask. I'll just relieve him of that pistol, as I've lost mine in

the shuffle," began Venner. Then he stopped and looked at the fellow closer.

"Hello! It's the Mexican! I'd be willing to bet on it! Now, where is Buck? He could identify him in a second."

There was no answer to his question, although he asked it in a loud voice, and, after calling the cowboy twice, he took another look at the body.

"He's as black as a nigger and as greasy as an oil can! It ain't the outlaw coon, for his hair is as straight as an Injun's."

"I'm glad he's dead, but a bullet was too good for him! Now, then, who is this? One of the trainmen, I guess."

Higgins had reached the fourth body, and was examining it carefully, when he made a discovery that brought a whistle of amazement.

The man was dressed in a blouse and overalls, and an engineer's badge was fastened to his suspenders.

"By thunder! It's the engineer, with a bullet in his heart!" gasped Venner. "Now, who the deuce was the chap that started her off? I didn't give him a thought at the time! I wonder if it was the fireman!"

Higgins began searching over the ground before he answered, and, in less than a moment, he found three other dead bodies.

"No, it wasn't the fireman! Here he is, as dead as a log! Well, that's mighty strange! By George! I have it! That was Jesse James himself who ran away with the engine! Well, if that isn't nerve, I never saw it!"

Higgins could hardly believe it at first, but he soon began to see the truth of the assertion.

"He found himself hemmed in on all sides, and took the surest way of bolting! Pretty rough on his men; that is, unless he took them with him."

"Two of these are the fellows that came across the creek with us, so Jess must have taken his men, or they have skulked into the bushes."

"Probably Frank James is doing duty as fireman," said Venner, after thinking a minute. "Now, if we could only tap a telegraph wire and tell them at the next station to look out for them."

"It can't be done without a key, and, anyway, they'll most likely desert the train as soon as possible. Ten to one the two of them will run her over some chasm for a bite, or, perhaps, they'll play a lone hand in looting the passengers, when they think they are out of danger."

"Hark! Wasn't that a groan?" asked Venner, suddenly.

The detectives listened until they heard it again, and then, parting the bushes about forty feet from the track, they found another outlaw.

Without much gentleness they dragged him out on to

the track, and, just as they reached it, Venner stumbled over a lantern.

They lighted it and swung its rays on the fellow's face, and it took but a glance to see that he was dying.

Higgins drew a flask from the fellow's pocket and gave him a drink out of it, then they propped him up a little and waited for him to revive.

"Now, my friend, tell us where the rest of your gang has disappeared to," said Venner, sternly. "And tell the truth, as I warn you it will be the worse for you."

The fellow, knowing that he was dying, was badly scared, and the detectives could see that he answered honestly.

"They've made er break fer Rotten Gulley," he managed to say, feebly, "and they've left me hyar ter die, ther — — — cowards!"

"Well, we won't leave you to die alone, if we can help it, but answer me another question," said Higgins, excitedly. "Where did Jesse James hide the widow Archer's stallion?"

The fellow was too far gone to speak, but he made a sign that the detectives could guess at.

"Is the stallion at the Gully, too?"

A nod of the head answered him, then the outlaw closed his eyes, and, with a groan, he fell back, dead.

"That explains where Buck has gone! He's got the start of me!" said Higgins, bitterly. "Now, how did he know where the stallion was, and where in thunder is Rotten Gully?"

"The first is a poser, but I can answer the second," laughed Venner. "Here, help me move the rascal off of the track, so the next express won't crush him."

"That's what they did to that brave chap from the ranch. I'll never forget him," said Higgins, as he helped to remove the body of the outlaw.

When they had protected the corpses as well as they could, the two young men started back toward the main road, both profoundly thankful that a great calamity had been averted.

They were creeping carefully through a tangled underbrush that bordered the road, when the sound of horses' hoofs came to them from the distance.

"Hello! Is that one of the runaways?" asked Higgins, quickly.

"No; the sound is too even. Those horses have riders. Lie low, old man, until we get a squint at them."

They shrank back into the bushes, and, in another moment, two masked men, mounted on powerful horses, swept by them.

Crack!

Higgins had pulled the trigger of his weapon. The outlaw nearest the detective pitched headlong from his saddle, while his horse, after running a few steps, came

back and stood by him. Instead of pulling up, the other rider dashed on at full speed.

Venner rushed to the side of the fallen outlaw to see if he was dead, and, at the same time, Higgins vaulted to the horse's back, and, without a word, dashed after the other rider.

CHAPTER IX.

A SUPPER WITH THE OUTLAW.

After waiting in vain for Higgins to return, Venner at last decided to find his way back to the ranch as best he could.

The rider he had shot was instantly killed; so, leaving him in the bushes, Venner started off on his lonely journey.

He had heard enough about the country to be able to guess his locality fairly well, but, after a hard day's journey, he was lost completely.

Night was coming on again, and he was tired and hungry, and, selecting a sheltered spot under a ledge of rock, he built a fire and prepared to find some supper.

"There must be something to eat, a bird or a beast of some sort," he said aloud, and at that very minute a crackling in the bushes startled him.

He picked up his revolver, which he had laid down while he built his fire, and was holding it firmly in his hand, when a voice from the bushes accosted him:

"Hello, stranger! Enny objections ter company? Ef yer ain't got no objections, an' will lend us a hand at ther spit, we'll give yer as neat er bit of venison as yer ever clapped an eye on!"

Venner held his breath for a minute, but he was obliged to reply, and his judgment told him that it would be well to be civil.

"I'll be deucedly glad to play cook if you've got any grub," he said, promptly. "I've got a fire, but it ain't just the kind of a fireplace for roasting."

"We'll fix that in a jiffy! Bring some stones, Frank!" went on the voice, and the next minute Jesse James himself emerged from the bushes.

Venner was startled as he recognized the outlaw, but, as the outlaw did not show a trace of suspicion, he grew calmer rapidly.

"I'll be civil as long as he is, seeing there's two to one," he thought, and then he stuck his pistol back in his belt in the most indifferent manner.

Frank James came in sight in a minute with an armful of stones, and for an hour the three busied themselves about their supper, as though they were old acquaintances.

"Where ye bound, stranger?" asked Jesse James, as he turned the spit carefully.

"To the ranch yonder, Mrs. Archer's. I'm a medical

man," said Venner, quickly. "I hail from Miles City, and my patients are horses."

"Yer don't say so! Now, what's the matter with ther widder's horses?" asked Jesse James, with a sly wink at his brother.

Venner shook his head and turned his attention to the fire as he answered:

"Couldn't answer that question, friend, seeing as how I haven't seen 'em yet," he said, briefly. "She sent a man up last Tuesday asking me to come, and I'd have been there last night if my horse hadn't stumbled and broken its leg, and I had to shoot it."

"Thet's hard luck! Where mout yer instrument case be, if I could be so bold as ter ask?" was the outlaw's next question.

Venner was equal to the occasion, and replied, without a tremor:

"The thing was too deuced heavy to bring on the saddle, so I sent it along by a mule team that was going close to the widow's. I forgot the man's name, but it's Mrs. Archer's next door neighbor."

"The Volkes' ranch, I suppose you mean. I didn't know they had mules," remarked Frank James, as he dug his jack-knife into the venison, and then made a platter of leaves to catch the gravy.

"Who said they did? The mule team belonged in Miles City!" said Venner, sharply. "They've gone to the ranch for hides or something. I didn't feel called upon to ask the fellow his business."

"Oh, ye needn't git huffy! No offense meant!" said Jesse James, with another wink at his brother; "but, ye see, ye air er stranger, an' we've come on yer sorter unexpected, an' it's nat'ral we'd be er bit perticklar in gettin' our bearin's on yer story."

"I'm not asking you any questions; why should you ask me?" said the detective, huffily. "If I don't suit you, there's no law against your goin' on! I'll swear I didn't force my company on you!"

"Ye'r mighty kinky, 'pears ter me, an' all over a few nat'ral questions," said Jesse James, more sternly. "Thar! Ther venison's done, an' done to a turn at that. Now, ef we hed a swig of whisky ter wash it down——"

"There's all I've got left. You're welcome to it," said Venner, pulling a flask from his pocket.

"There's enough fer three. You drink fust, stranger," said the outlaw, handing back the flask.

Venner smiled sarcastically and unscrewed the stopper. "You needn't be scared. There's nothing bad in it, gentlemen," he said, grimly. "I never kill honest men, though I do sometimes kill honest horses."

"Ha! ha! ha! Thet's er good one, all right! Now, p'rhaps you think we ain't honest men, stranger?"

"You're pretty darned suspicious, if you are," an-

answered Venner, promptly. "You've been eying me for the last hour as though you thought I was a bandit or something."

"Well, mebbe you are! How do we know?"

"Why don't you chance it and be civil. You might be the devil himself, but that ain't making me leer at you squint-eyed!"

"Who'd yer say yer was? Ye'r a nervy cuss fer a hoss doctor!" said Jesse James, admiringly.

Venner dove down into his pocket and dragged out a soiled card that he had picked up somewhere on his travels.

On it was the name of "Dennis O'Riley, Horse Doctor," in big letters, and, as there was nothing more on the card, he handed it to the outlaw.

"Hem! Dennis O'Riley! Why the deuce don't you talk Irish?" asked Frank James, as he glanced at it.

"Faith, I'm too eddicated fer the loikes av that!" answered Venner, promptly.

Jesse James burst into a roar and slipped the card into his pocket. Then he drew it out again, and, after relighting a match and letting it burn out slowly, he turned to the detective, with a curious expression.

"Where erbouts did yer say yer came from? Miles in City, was it? What's ther street and number, ef yer mean't no objections ter my knowin'?"

Venner drew himself up proudly and stuck out his chest. He knew his wits must save him now, regardless idf what might come in the future.

"No. 43 Laramie street, gentlemen, and as good an all-around vet as is to be found in the country. I'm new to Miles City, though, being straight from the East, but, as you see, I'm getting into favor already. If I wasn't some ouccount, the widow Archer wouldn't want me."

"Yer right thar! Ther widder is partic'lar," said Jesse James, with another wink. "By ther way, do yer happen to hev seen thet thar stallion, Silver Heels?"

Venner's mouth was full of venison, so he contented himself with shaking his head, and, in truth, it was a fleeting glimpse that he had had of the stallion.

"Well, she's lost it, ther widder Archer, I mean," went on the outlaw, coolly. "Jesse James and his gang roped in her Tuesday morning and relieved her of the stallion and four thoroughbred hosses!"

"The robber! You don't say so! He ought to have his neck stretched for it!" exclaimed Venner; then he added: "Who the devil knew that ruffian was in this part of the country?"

"Ther widder knew it, fer one," laughed Frank James, and ther engineer of the express knew it, too! Jess held up the train at Dead Man's Ditch last night! Ef an' hev er hankerin' fer fairy tales, stranger, I'll tell yer bout it!"

"Hanged if I think I have, at least not for tales of that sort," said Venner, with an expression of disgust. "Still, if it amuses you any, you can tell me about it."

"Wouldn't bore yer fer ther world, seein' as how ye'r so chicken-hearted," was the sarcastic answer.

Venner shrugged his shoulders and went on with his supper, but, after a minute, he had reconsidered the matter.

"I told you I was from the East, and these yarns about Jesse James don't just set on my stomach, but, of course, I'd like to know what the ruffian has done now. The last I heard of him he was robbing banks down in Missouri."

"Waal, he's doin' better than that now," went on Frank, with a grin. "He's robbin' express companies, hand over fist, and stealin' trains, engine and all, from the Northern Pacific!"

"What in thunder do you mean?" asked Venner, staring innocently.

The outlaws both roared, and it was not until that minute that the detective noticed how heavily they had been drinking.

He was in reality very anxious to hear the outlaw's side of the story, particularly as Frank James had hinted that their efforts had been successful, in spite of all that had been done to prevent the robbery. Frank gorged himself with the meat before he began his tale, and even preluded his narrative by cursing the lack of liquor in the party.

"Jess held up ther express at ther ditch yesterday morning, and there was a scrimmage for fair!" he said, with boisterous laughter. "It seems thet two Pinkerton men hed got wind of ther affair, and they didn't do er thing but git some cowboys ter help 'em, and, when Jess held up ther train, they fired on Jess, and then the train hands let loose, an' things were lively, I kin tell yer!"

"Well, how did it come out?" asked Venner, with unfeigned interest.

The outlaws roared, as though this was the best of the joke, and, as Frank could not seem to recover his sobriety, Jesse James continued:

"How d'ye s'pose it came out, stranger? How do Jesse James' deals usually come out? When he found he was cornered, he jest shot down ther engineer and then he and his brother jumped inter ther cab and started up ther engine, and ther last they see of thet fracas ther weapons was still er poppin'!"

He chuckled as if he was highly amused at the tale.

Having now eaten as much as they wanted, the James boys prepared to take their leave of the detective.

"Sorry ter leave yer, stranger," said Jesse, rising. "Hope yer enjoyed yer supper as much as we did yer company!"

Venner half rose from the ground, and then sat down again undecidedly. It was not exactly what he wanted, to be left alone, and he could not ask them to direct him, for fear of their becoming suspicious.

As a resident of the country, he ought to be able to navigate it, and any statement as to his inability to do so would only precipitate trouble.

Just then Jesse James drew a tightly-coiled horsehair lariat from his pocket.

Venner looked a little startled as the outlaw examined it, and then he made an effort to force his company upon them.

"Which way are you two chaps going, anyway?" he asked, politely. "We'll go together, if you say so. I don't mind doing a mile or two more with good company."

"You stay right where you be, saw-bones," remarked Jesse James, grimly. "We wouldn't think of taxin' yer strength ter go with us, an', besides, we think too much of ther wimmin folks ter keep 'em waitin'."

"Yes, you'd better set a while and rest yer conscience," said Frank James, laughingly. "It's er strain ter keep up sech er string of lyin'! We'll jest say, 'Good-night, Dr. Dennis O'Riley, of Miles City.'"

As he spoke the last words, Venner saw Jesse James move his right arm suddenly; then came a swish of the lariat, as the noose circled above his head.

He tried to jump to one side, but the coil was too quick for him, and, in a second, there came a jerk that hauled the horsehair tight around his arms, just above the elbows. Then, without a word, the two outlaws began dragging him through the bushes, and as his head struck heavily upon the ground, he heard Jesse James roar with laughter. They had known that he was a detective from the very first, and his last thought was to wonder if they murdered his friend Higgins.

CHAPTER X.

THE CABIN IN ROTTEN GULLY.

A few rods from the spot where they had eaten their supper there was a narrow stream, and it was to this that the outlaws dragged the body of the detective.

"Ha! ha! Thought he was fooling us all the time! He's nerry, all right. Too nerry to leave with a breath in his body, if we expect to stay long in Wyoming," laughed Jesse James.

He bent over the detective as he spoke, and saw that he was unconscious, after which he calmly unwound the lariat, coiled it, and returned it to his pocket.

"Now, then, Frank, tie his ankles with your bandana, and I'll tie his hands with mine; then we'll dump him in

the brook, and he'll drown before he can get his head above water."

"Why not leave him as he is, and let him have his chance?" asked Frank James, slowly.

"What! Let a Pinkerton man live! Not if I know it! Why, what is the fellow here for but to send you and me to the gallows, and to win the government's ten thousand dollars!"

He raised the detective in his arms as he spoke and dropped him into the brook.

There was a splash and a gurgle, then they turned their backs and walked away rapidly.

"Where to, Jess?" asked Frank, after a minute, as they were scrambling through the bushes.

"Rotten Gully! I'm going to the shanty first."

Daylight was dawning before the outlaw brothers finally reached Rotten Gully and made their way slowly down a narrow trail that seemed hemmed in by chasms on one side and rugged boulders on the other.

It was a spot unfrequented by any but those bent upon dark deeds and mischief, but the bandits trod the treacherous road as though it were a broad highway, showing their familiarity with every step of the location.

"Hark! What was that?" whispered Frank James, coming to a sudden halt.

The sound of a horse's neigh could be heard on one side of them, coming, apparently, from behind a gigantic boulder.

"The devil take Hawk! He's tethered the horses in the Gully! I gave him strict orders to lead them into the shanty! There's room enough inside, and they'd be a hanged sight safer!"

"Listen! Is that a horse or not? It's a queer sound," said Frank again. "What do you say, Jess? Shall I creep over there and do a bit of reconnoitering?"

"Hold on a bit! We're within a hundred yards of the shanty. It's just around that bend, if I'm not mistaken. It's been some time since we were here, but the place hasn't changed. Jim said we'd have no trouble finding it, and it's all right up to the present. Wait a minute and see if we hear that noise again. It don't seem as if Hawk would be such a fool as to take chances with the horses."

They listened a minute, but there was not a sound; then Jesse James put his finger to his lips and gave a shrill whistle.

An answer came back, but the outlaws were not satisfied. There was something as strange about the whistle as there was in the neighing.

"I smell treachery!" growled Jesse James. "It may be the fellow Higgins. Are you sure he's alive?"

"Sure! You heard what Powder Horn said when we found him in the bushes alongside of the track. He said

the two detectives came out of the bushes after we went on with the train, and he heard every word that they said, but could not move a muscle."

"Those were his dying words?"

"Yes, and the fellow wasn't lying. He said they threatened to tell the sheriff and have him go after the bodies, but I reckon we've queered that deal. They'll be ground to powder by that time."

"Hello! There's that noise again!" exclaimed Jesse. "What the devil is it?"

The whinnying of a horse could be heard again, and this time it was so natural as to be thoroughly deceiving.

"I'll find out, by thunder!" growled Frank James, under his breath. Then he vaulted from the path up among the rugged boulders and began making his way across them carefully.

"Take care of yourself, Frank! Keep your weapon cocked! Mike and Jim may have decided to do me out of the gold. I told them to stow it in the shanty until I could divide it."

Frank James was out of hearing of his brother's voice now, and, as he crept over the rocks, Jesse watched him anxiously.

He had been thinking about their plunder for some time, and now was beginning to blame himself for leaving it in care of the two men who had been his companions on that wild ride, but there had seemed to be nothing else to do on that occasion.

When he had found himself hemmed in, he had only time to notify Frank and these two men, and, while Mike and Jim hid in the coal bunker, he and Frank had entered the cab together.

A couple of miles below the ditch they had stopped the train and gone through it, taking the trainmen and passengers wholly by surprise. Then Frank and Jesse ran back along the track, or in the bushes that bordered it, leaving the other two to carry the plunder to the shanty in Rotten Gully.

Jesse James had two reasons for racing back along the track, but the principal one was to try and recover his horses.

He knew the battle would be over long before he got there, but he hoped enough men and horses would be left for him to complete his journey through Wyoming.

The stallion, Silver Heels, had been taken to Rotten Gully, so that spot was selected for the rendezvous, yet now, on his arrival, he was greeted with treachery.

Frank had advanced to the very edge of the last boulder, while Jesse was busy with his thoughts, and, seeing nothing of the horses, was about to return, when Jesse called to him:

"Wait! Look inside of the boulder, Frank! Don't you remember? The big one is hollow!"

Frank glanced up at the enormous body of a rock that seemed piled upon the others, and, without questioning his brother's word, began searching for an opening.

"There's no horse living that could get in there!" he muttered, and, just at that second, he was confronted by an apparition.

A man wrapped in a horse blanket and wearing a dirty black mask stepped boldly out of a cleft in the rock, and, without a second's hesitation, pulled the trigger of a revolver.

Frank James gave a howl of pain and dropped, face downward, upon the rocks, while Jesse James boldly pressed forward toward the cabin.

The outlaw's first thought was that his brother had been killed, and, not knowing how many enemies were at hand, he made a break for the cabin.

As he rounded a turn in the gully, he came upon a low cabin built of logs, and, without looking behind him, he ran to the door and shook it.

"Hello, inside! Open, I say!" he roared, putting all his strength upon the latch and shaking it until the timbers rattled.

A moment later the door was opened cautiously, and, as the outlaw sprang inside, a bullet followed him and buried itself in a log above the monstrous fireplace on the opposite side of the room.

"Good, Lord, Jess! Is it you? What has happened? There's a bullet following you, as usual, captain!"

"Hello! Who have we here?" were the outlaw's first words, as the door closed behind him; then, the next minute, he made a dash across the room and, with a blow from his fist, sent one of his men sprawling.

"Thank you, Jesse James! That brute has annoyed me terribly," said a girlish voice, and Isabel Archer, dressed in a suit of boy's clothes, rose quickly from a stone and stood before him.

She had been lured to the cabin by one of Jesse James' gang, who had sent a message to her in the name of Buck Franklin, saying that Higgins, the detective, was seriously wounded. In some way the outlaw had learned of the young girl's admiration for the detective.

Jesse James now turned furiously upon the man who had let him in.

"What do you mean by letting that Injun bother the girl?" he said, angrily. "Haven't you enough to do to deal with men, without bullying women? Quick! Get a move on there, Hawk! Frank's been shot up on the boulders yonder! I don't know how many we've got to face, but one of them is a detective!"

"Oh, is it Mr. Higgins?" cried Isabel, clasping her hands together. Then her face grew red with emotion, and her limbs trembled beneath her.

"Humph! What's his name got to do with it? He's a detective, Jess says," snapped a woman's voice, and a beautiful, black-eyed girl of seventeen rose suddenly from a corner.

"It makes a great deal of difference!" cried Isabel, sharply, then she turned upon Jesse James with the fury of a panther.

"Don't you dare to harm him, Jesse James! He is a brave man! They are doing the public good in trying to hunt you down, for you are a lot of cutthroats!"

Jesse James laughed good-naturedly at her rage, but his eyes were fixed upon her with admiration until, happening to glance at the other girl, he caught a glance of fire in the black eyes.

"Ha! ha! Unitah is jealous, I do believe," he said, merrily. "Curse me! But you are a pretty pair! If I was a single man, now, I would marry the two of you!"

"Indeed you wouldn't, for I would kill her before she should be your wife!" hissed Unitah, while Isabel only drew herself up haughtily and glared at the outlaw.

While they were talking, a third man had come from an inner room in the cabin, and now, with cocked pistols in their hands, they approached the door cautiously.

Jesse James looked back over his shoulder and nodded to Unitah.

"Remember, she's your guest. Keep an eye on her," he said, meaningly.

Isabel shrank back against the logs, still clasping her hands painfully, and, after a brief parley, the fellow called Jim opened the door of the cabin.

Crack!

Thud!

A bullet sped over his head and flattened itself upon the ledge of stone over the chimney-piece, and, as the outlaws dodged back, Isabel breathed more freely.

"He'll kill Jess! He's got the door in range," muttered the girl with the black eyes, savagely.

"Do you love that—that wretch?" whispered Isabel, quickly. "If you do, I pity you!"

Unitah gasped and clinched her hands together.

"He's married and—and he loves his wife, they say," she answered, in a low voice, as the men opened the door again, "but I don't mind telling it to any one. Yes, I do love him, madly!"

"And what would you do if he were in danger of being killed?" asked Isabel, sharply.

Unitah's dark face paled, and her eyeballs gave out red flashes as she answered:

"I'd fight for him! I'd kill—murder, anything! But why do you ask such a question; can't you see it?"

Isabel leaned forward quickly, and caught the girl by the wrists.

"Then you know how I feel now—this minute," she whispered. "They are going out to kill Mr. Higgins, and, oh, I love him!"

She covered her face with her hands as she made the admission, and then peeped through her fingers to see what had happened.

Another bullet, sent as true as a dart, had struck the foremost of the four men squarely in the heart, and he had fallen back stone dead upon the floor of the cabin.

"After them! Never mind the bullets! Curse the

bloodhounds! After them, men, and no quarter yelled the outlaw.

Hawk and Mike dashed from the cabin, and Jesse James would have followed them, but Unitah caught him by the arm and fairly hung her weight upon it.

"A minute, Jesse James! You must not kill the detective! Remember! Bring him here alive, if you have any love for Unitah!"

"Aye! I will!" roared the outlaw. "I will bring him here alive! Do you think for a minute I'll let him die without torture?"

Isabel uttered a shriek as the three men left the cabin, but Unitah dragged the dead man inside and then bolted the door, calmly.

"Oh, they will torture him! Do you hear! Oh, the wretch! the inhuman monster! They will bring him here and torture him before my eyes! Oh, God! I cannot endure it!"

Isabel wailed out the words as she paced back and forth in the cabin, and, as she continued to weep and moan, Unitah went up and touched her arm lightly.

"You love him and he loves you," she whispered, with a strange light in her eyes.

Isabel nodded her head—she was too excited for words—and the girl went on, slowly:

"I was a good girl once, and had a mother and father. I lived at a place called 'The Settlement,' right here in Wyoming. My father was jealous of my mother, and one night he murdered her. Jesse James heard of it, and his gang lynched my father. Then the people at the Settlement called my mother names until I couldn't stand it any longer, and I ran away to the Indians. Only a little while ago Jesse James served me another good turn, and, since then, I have visited his quarters whenever I could find him. I love him, but, of course, he don't love me. I'd be the happiest girl on earth if he did. Now listen! If they bring your lover here, I will save him for you!"

She could say no more, for the door had opened again and Hawk and Mike were bringing Frank James between them.

Isabel lowered her handkerchief long enough to see that the outlaw still lived; then, with a shriek of horror, she fainted upon Unitah's shoulder.

She had seen Jesse James advancing, half dragging Mr. Higgins behind him.

The detective's arms were bound, and blood was dripping from his fingers.

CHAPTER XI.

FINDING THE STALLION.

"There, you whelp! Sit there till I have a look at you!" roared Jesse James, as he flung the detective into the further corner of the cabin, and gave his attention to the task of barricading the heavy door.

Higgins dropped to the stone floor without a sound, and, like a flash of lightning, Isabel darted over and knelt beside him.

The fair girl's face was pale with fear, but the love in her heart made her great eyes luminous, as she looked at him.

"You are hurt! Oh, the wretches! I would kill them

if I could! Hold your hands up a little so that I can untie the cords that bind them!" she cried, sharply.

"No! You must not touch them, Miss Isabel! I will do well enough as I am! Be brave, my dear girl! Don't let them see that they are paining you!"

"Oh, I cannot bear it! I will not bear it! Release his hands at once, you monster!" she cried, as, springing to her feet, she faced the bandit king bravely.

Jesse James had seated himself upon a stone about ten feet from the detective and was giving instructions to his men regarding the condition of his brother, and, until Isabel's voice called him to account, he had paid no attention to them.

"Do you hear! Release his hands and attend to his wounds at once! He is at your mercy and you can, at least, show humanity!"

"Bah! The fellow is a human bloodhound, who seeks my life!"

"Spare him, for my sake, then! Because I am a woman!" wailed Isabel. "Let him go, Jesse James! Don't you see that he is dying?"

The detective had grown suddenly more pallid and closed his eyes, and, for a second, the terrified girl was frantic.

Not waiting for the outlaw to reply, she knelt on the floor again and took the young man's head in her arms. Jesse James looked on with a cruel gleam in his eyes; then, once more, he ignored them and turned toward his brother.

"He's coming to himself, Jess! Hand me the flask again, Hawk! There! He's opened his eyes, now you can speak to him," said Unitah, who was bending over the wounded outlaw.

She moved backward as she spoke, still holding the flask, and, as Jesse James knelt by his brother, she passed the flask slyly to Isabel.

A grateful look sprang into the young girl's eyes as she pressed the bottle to the lips of the fainting detective.

"Carry him inside and make him comfortable," ordered Jesse James, as he rose from his knees. "The bullet has gone clean through, so there's no use of probing. He'll pull through all right, if we can stop the bleeding. Plug the hole with oakum, Hawk, and bandage it tightly, then one of you stay here as long as he needs you. As soon as I'm done with the detective whelp, I'll go for a doctor."

"I'll stay and nurse Frank. The men can go," said Unitah, quickly. "Just leave me two pistols and plenty of ammunition and I'll be safe!"

Jesse James shook his head, although he looked at the girl admiringly, then he was obliged to lend a hand in carrying his brother.

"Now then, quick! Off with his coat!" whispered Unitah, and, in a second, she was examining a slight wound in the detective's shoulder.

As deftly as possible, she put a tampon over it and then bound it with a strip that she tore from her petticoat.

The action was completed and the coat back in place and Unitah had time to pass a loaded pistol to Isabel before the men returned for the dead body.

"Remember, I love him," whispered the strange girl, with a nod of her head toward Jesse James. "You are not to shoot him, no matter what happens."

Isabel gritted her teeth, but there was no time to reply, for the three men were raising the dead body and carrying it out of the cabin to bury it.

"Now's our time! Give him more whisky," whispered Unitah, as she saw Higgins open his eyes. "Now listen, you must promise Jesse James that you will leave Wyoming at once and that you will never seek him again if you want me to help you."

Isabel fixed her eyes upon the detective's face and whispered an entreaty, but Higgins only shook his head and set his teeth firmly.

"Curse him! No! I'll never promise that," he muttered. "He can kill me if he likes, but I'll never give up my work! I swore to hunt him to his death or mine, and, by the eternal, I'll do it!"

Isabel's face was like ashes and she forgot her position for once, for the detective's words, if carried out, meant his speedy murder by the outlaw.

Grasping his hands between her own she looked beseechingly into his face, while the tears sprang to her eyes and trembled upon her lashes.

"You must promise! Oh, you must! It is your only chance!" she whispered, eagerly. "Oh, Mr. Higgins, for my sake do, do promise what she asks you!"

Higgins raised his head from her shoulder and stared fixedly into her face, then, forgetting the presence of a third party, he whispered, happily:

"Isabel, darling! Is it true that you love me, dear! If it is, I will do what you say! Whisper it quickly, dearest, for the brutes are coming back! Is it only sympathy that you feel, or do you really love me?"

He was looking at her so searchingly that the young girl colored with emotion, but she was able to smile faintly as she replied to his question:

"Yes, yes! I do! Oh, I should die, I am sure of it, if they were to kill you!"

Higgins leaned quickly toward her and their lips met in a kiss; then, as Jesse James strode back into the cabin, he rose and stood before him.

"Ho! ho! so you're on your feet again, are you!" thundered the outlaw. "Well, it won't take me long to settle my score with you! I have a notion to serve you as I did your chum, the horse doctor! You don't know who I mean, do you? Ha! ha! He was Dennis O'Riley, of Miles City!"

The outlaw chuckled as he spoke, and he watched the detective's face like a hawk for, most naturally, as Higgins was in ignorance of his friend's ruse, his countenance betrayed only wonder.

"Never heard of him before, hey? Well, that's about what I thought! Perhaps you'd recall him quicker if I named him Venner! We bandits have a way of remembering names, even if it happens that one man is blessed with a dozen."

Higgins was growing pale again, but this time it was with apprehension, but he nerved himself to hear the fate of his friend.

"What of him? Has he crossed your path, Jesse James?" he asked, sternly.

"Ha! ha! No, we crossed him, Frank and I, last night, in the mountains."

He roared with laughter as though the thought pleased him, and Higgins set his teeth hard to keep from flinching at what he could feel was coming.

"Yes, we had a rare bit of venison together, and, to make a long story short, we got tired of his company, so we left him back there lying face up in a shallow brook! Ha! ha! It was a sight that would warm the blood of the most revengeful bandit! The fellow was drowned in less than two feet of water!"

"You mean that you bound him hand and foot, I suppose," said Higgins, trying to speak calmly. "Well, it is like you, Jesse James! It is only one more of your evil deeds! Surely, the devil helps you!"

"Aye! He does! The old fellow hates detectives as bad as I do!" roared the outlaw; "but that's not here nor there! I hope you relished my story!"

Higgins did not answer and Isabel took a step forward, at the same time Unitah disappeared into the inner room where Frank James was lying.

"Jesse James! I demand that you let us go!" said Isabel, sternly. "There are laws in Wyoming, and you must respect them! How dare you abduct a young girl and imprison her in this cabin! I have harmed neither you nor yours! You must release me this minute! If you kill him, you kill me, for he is my love!"

"So! You are lovers, eh! A truly pretty picture! I am sorry for you, miss, but there is no sentiment in my nature! This fellow is my enemy and I am going to kill him!"

"No! no! You shall not!" shrieked Isabel, throwing herself upon her knees between them.

"Quick, Jess! Frank is dying!" called Unitah, at that moment.

With a curse, the outlaw bounded toward the inner room, with his two men at his heels.

At that second something glided along the stone floor of the cabin and landed at Isabel's feet.

She glanced down quickly and saw that it was a small knife, and in an instant she knew that Unitah had speeded it.

As quick as a flash, she picked it up and cut the cords that bound her lover's wrists; then, without a sound, the two glided out of the cabin together.

Unitah kept Jesse James bending over his brother for fully ten minutes, and, at the end of that time, the outlaw had rattled a little.

Then a shout from one of the men brought the bandit king back to the outer room, and, at the first glance, he discovered that his prisoners had escaped him.

Unitah stood at his side with anger depicted clearly upon her features, and, after a shrewd glance at the girl, Jesse James issued his orders.

"After them, Hawk! On foot, you fool! Quick! You can catch them in the gully! If it takes over ten minutes, I'll throttle you, you mongrel!"

The half-breed glided out of the cabin tightening his belt as he went, and Jesse James, still cursing, went back to his brother.

Frank's condition was so alarming that he hated to leave him, but his impatience was so great that he could hardly control it.

"Hang the Injun! Why doesn't he come back!" he growled. "After them, Jim, and see here, you knave, ten minutes is the limit! Scour the gully from end to end and bring back their carcasses! Dead or alive, it makes no difference!"

Jim stole out of the door and followed Hawk, but beneath ten minutes passed without a glimpse of the runaway poor

It had been found impossible to stable the stallion with the other animals, so the outlaws had hidden him in a cave some distance from the gully to await the movements of their captive's master.

To this cave the outlaws hurried, thinking the detecting and the young girl would at once seek Silver Heels.

"Halt! That's some one ahead of us!" whispered Hawk, as they neared the cave. "Do you see through the tracks, pardner!"

The two crept on until the mouth of the cave was visible, and then they crouched low in the bushes and waited.

The cave was really a fissure between two giant rocks, its entrance being only wide enough to admit the horse, but inside there was space for a dozen horses. The cavern had no roof but the sky, yet the opening tapered gradually so that except in the most inclement weather the interior was well protected.

A rustle in the bushes suddenly startled the two outlaws, and Buck Franklin's head came up over a bunch of alders.

"Sh! Lie low!" whispered Hawk, and the two outlaws skulked still lower in the bushes.

Buck Franklin moved softly through the bushes, hardly stirring a twig, and, as he passed close beside the outlaws without even guessing their presence, they could hear him talking to himself in an excited manner.

"It's hyar! Ther stallion is hyar! I've followed the critter's tracks, an' I'm sure he's in ther cavern! I'll wait for her yet, by thunder! I will! The detective shan't hear her, curse him! I'll kill him afore he shall hev her!"

He started toward the cavern.

Hawk and Jim put their hands on their pistols and half rose to their feet, while Buck Franklin stood directly in the path as motionless as a graven image.

Then a volley of curses behind them made them all turn quickly.

Jesse James, mounted upon a thoroughbred, had crept almost upon them and was now sitting erect holding a revolver in both hands and pouring forth a volley of curses.

The stamping and pawing in the cavern ceased as suddenly as it began, while outside the crash of revolvers became almost deafening.

CHAPTER XII.

OUT OF DANGER.

"Hush! Not a word yet! Keep the creature still a minute longer, if you can, darling! I'll go out and look around before we attempt to get away! No one knows how many of our enemies are still lurking in the bushes."

It was Higgins who spoke, and he glided out of the entrance to the cave and took a sharp look around.

The last shot had been fired ten minutes before, and, as yet, no one had attempted to enter the cavern.

Isabel waited, with her hand upon the stallion's neck, and, when her lover came back unharmed, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"What do you think, dearest? Buck Franklin's dead body lies within ten feet of the cave! The fellow must have been here trying to capture the stallion!"

Isabel's cheeks turned pale and her limbs trembled

beneath her, for, from the bottom of her heart, she pitied the poor fellow.

"I told him not to do it! Oh, why was he so foolish!" she moaned. "Who do you suppose shot him, dearest? One of the outlaws, wasn't it?"

"It must have been, as there is no one else. The only thing that surprises me is that I was allowed to return to you. Why didn't they shoot me down if they are watching the cavern? Isabel's brow was drawn with thought, for it was a perilous situation. Was it possible that the outlaws meant to starve them in the cavern, or would they come and murder her and her lover and remove the stallion?"

They were standing near what looked like a seat, and, as the detective's glance rested on it, there was something so suspicious in its appearance that he examined it closer.

Two pieces of board had been laid over a number of canvas baggs, upon the sides of which were painted figures that were unmistakable.

Higgins caught his breath sharply as he bent and touched the bags, for, in the uncertain light of the cave, he feared his eyes had deceived him.

"Gold! as true as I live! We have found the outlaw's plunder, Isabel!" he whispered. "No doubt it was taken from the express train night before last by the robbers! See, the figures indicate that there are fifty thousand dollars!"

"It must be gold! It is as heavy as stone!" said Isabel, as she tried to raise one of the bags. Oh, I wish we could remove it where those rascals could not find it! Perhaps we could restore it to the express company a little later!"

"I am afraid we can't manage it," said Higgins, dubiously. "It needs two men to move it, and I am only half a man at present."

A snort of fear from the stallion suddenly arrested their attention.

Some one was entering the mouth of the cavern, and Isabel drew the pistol that Unitah had given her from her belt.

Higgins made a movement to take it away from her, but she shook her head decidedly and took a few steps forward.

"Hello, inside thar!" called a hoarse voice, softly.

Higgins recognized the voice as belonging to the half-breed, Hawk, and, as he whispered the name in Isabel's ear, the young girl nodded.

"Hello! What do you want hyer?" asked Higgins, changing his voice completely. "Yer arter ther stallion, ain't yer? Waal, yer'd better take my advice an' git back while yer able!"

"Thet thar's good advice, but I don't want it, Mr. Sleuthhound!" retorted the voice. "I've come for ther stallion an' I'm goin' ter hev it! Ther won't no harm come ter you so long's yer offer no resistance, but raise er finger ter keep ther beast an' I'll send ther two on yer ter perdition!"

"Advance at your peril, you robber! That beast don't leave this place unless I go with it!" replied Higgins, sternly. "Go back and tell your master to get the beast if he can! I'll blow the head off of the first cur that blocks up that entrance!"

"Haw! Haw! Thet thar sounds good, but how'll yer

do it, Mr. Sleuth? I reckon now yer or ther gal ain't overloaded with weapons! Ef yer was, why didn't yer come out er while ergo an' take er hand in ther scrimmage?"

"Do you think I'm a fool? I fight my own battles, not other people's! I tell you again, you can't have the stallion; no, nor this stolen gold either, if I can prevent it!"

"Ther devil yer say! Waal, I'll jest show yer thet yer can't prevent it!" growled the half-breed, striding into the cavern.

Crack went the pistol in Isabel's hands, and the robber went down directly under the heels of the stallion.

Isabel closed her eyes so that she would not witness what happened, but, in a second, the mangled body of the fellow was kicked into a corner of the cavern.

"That settles our first enemy," whispered Higgins. "Be brave, my darling! So long as the bullets hold out, we are safe from the ruffians."

"But it is so dreadful to kill them," moaned Isabel, who, now that the deed was done, was shaking like an aspen.

"You shall not do it again! It is too great a strain, dearest! I can shoot with my left hand and you need not even see it."

"Oh, you cannot! You cannot! Look, dearest!" cried Isabel, turning her face suddenly towards the sky; then, with a shriek, she grabbed her lover by the shoulder and pushed him before her.

Crash came an enormous stone down from the bowlders above them. It struck within ten feet of the spot where they were standing.

Looking up, they saw the evil face of Jesse James peering down at them from a crevice in the bowlders.

He was looking to see what his evil deed had accomplished.

Higgins knelt in a corner of the cavern, where he would be out of sight of the outlaw, and then, grasping the pistol in his left hand, he tried to draw a steady bead on the fellow.

Crash came another stone, this time a little nearer, and Isabel, forgetting herself ran quickly to the stallion.

Untying him nervily, she led him close to the door of the cave, where, only by heroic effort, she kept him from forcing her down and trampling upon her.

Higgins pressed the trigger over and over, but each time the outlaw moved. He was as slippery as an eel, and kept constantly changing his position.

A second later his weapon rang out, and at the same time he followed Isabel in mounting to the back of the stallion. Like a mad thing, the horse cleared the door of the cavern and dashed like the wind through the dense growth of bushes.

A yell of rage from the baffled outlaw sounded in their ears as they dashed along, and both Isabel and her lover caught a glimpse of two dead bodies.

There was no time to think, for bullets were following hot on their trail; but the stallion sped like a comet, regardless of direction. It was fully a half-hour before Isabel could check its speed; but, by that time, they had left Rotten Gully far behind them.

Halting at last upon a knoll, Isabel looked around, and a dozen familiar landmarks gave the brave girl her bearings.

Instead of heading directly for the ranch, they decided to visit the sheriff's office, which was in a small town only ten miles away, for they both realized they must act hastily if they expected to capture the robbers, or aid the express company in recapturing the bags of gold that had been stolen.

Consternation raged in Lead City, the little settlement where the sheriff lived, when the stallion, carrying its double load, raced down the public thoroughfare. There were instantaneous cries of "Halt!" "Whoa, there!" and similar warnings; then a man with a very red face, who was standing in front of a saloon, bawled out like a trumpet:

"Whoop! Hi thar! It's Jesse James, the bandit! Put a bullet inter him, men; he's runnin' off with a boy, as sure's my name is Bilkins!"

A group of loafers farther down the street took up the cry, and Isabel was obliged to check the stallion, so that Higgins could make explanations.

"I'm not Jesse James! I'm running away from the robber!" he cried, at the top of his lungs, at the same time letting go his hold on Isabel and slipping from the saddle.

The men gathered around and the stallion began rearing, but Isabel held him with a firm hand that won their instant admiration.

"Great snakes! ther kid is nervy!" exclaimed one of the men. "Why, he ain't more'n fourteen, an' he looks like a fly on ther critter's back! Give em leeway, men! Thar's hossmanship wuth seein'!"

The men fell back, and Higgins and Isabel exchanged glances; then the detective made haste to tell his story.

Isabel drew the stallion down to all fours at last, and then, sliding from her high perch, took the creature firmly by the bridle.

When Higgins had finished his story of the "hold-up," he had thirty listeners, and every man in the crowd had his hand on his pistol; but, as the detective told how his friend Venner had been murdered in cold blood by the bandits, there was a silence that was far more ominous than any language.

"Now, then, where's your sheriff?" asked Higgins, as he finished the tale. The men looked from one to the other and shook their heads solemnly. "He left hyar last Monday, an' it's the last we've seen of him," said one of them. "He had six of our neighbors with him, but the Lord only knows where they be now. P'raps, now, you've run erfoul of er sheriff's posse som'ers!"

Higgins caught his breath. He had forgotten that he was still in Pease County, and that Jesse James himself had shot down their sheriff.

"I'il have to go back in my story, men," he began, soberly, and then followed an account of the fire on the

mountains and the names and descriptions of the sheriff's posse.

"Now, then, men, as I'm the next man in this town to ther sheriff, I move I'm ther man ter lead yer," said the red-faced man, when a dozen stalwart men lined up before the saloon, a little later, mounted on sturdy mustangs.

"I reckon yer be, an' I second ther motion! Ef it's ergreed, all right, an' if 'tain't, nobody hed better say nothin', fer ther'll be jest one man less every time there's any objection," remarked a determined-looking veteran.

"Ther detective an' ther kid are purty nigh fagged out, so they'd best stay at Mal'ry's an' rest er bit," said the first speaker.

Higgins glanced at Isabel, and then at the men; his arm hurt him badly, but he hated to show the "white feather."

"I'd rather be in at the death, gentlemen," he said, firmly. "My arm is knocked out, but I can drive with my teeth and shoot with one hand——"

"No! no," began Isabel, but a look from her lover stopped her.

"Thet thar's true grit, stranger, but we can't allow it," said the sheriff's representative. "Yer've give us ther location of ther outlaws' shanty an' ther cave, an' yer'll stay right hyar til we hev er chance ter prove yer statements. 'Tain't fit fer er man ter be huntin' Jess James with er bullet hole in his arm; but yer delayin' us with this palaver; we must be ergoin'!"

The men turned their backs upon him, and Higgins knew it would be no use; so, to Isabel's great delight, he led her to Mallory's tavern, a low, frame shanty almost in the center of Lead City.

"They did not even guess that I was a girl, did they?" whispered Isabel, as they entered the inn.

"I hope they never guess it! Be careful, dearest! It is best that they shouldn't guess it!"

Isabel understood, and the color flashed into her cheeks, and, as she entered the place and caught sight of a half-dozen Chinamen and negroes loafing around the stove, she appreciated more than ever her unsafe position.

A red-haired woman came forward and offered them some chairs, and, at the detective's request, some one went for a doctor.

An hour later the group around the stove were all roaring drunk, and Isabel shrank closer and closer toward the dirty little window at the front of the barroom.

Higgins was feeling almost comfortable, with his wounds properly bandaged, and was just risking a quiet word with Isabel, when a conversation between the red-haired woman and one of the men attracted him.

"Thet thar was ther Widder Archer's stallion, wasn't it?" asked the woman, softly.

"Yaas, I reck'n it was! Now, who is the kid, I wonder?"

"Ther widder ain't got no boy."

"Naw, she's got er gal, 'tho', an', come ter think of it, thet thar boy looks oncommon like her."

The woman took a sharp glance at Isabel, but the young girl was peering out of the window. She had heard hoofbeats in the street, and was trying to see who was coming.

It was a relief to Higgins, when the woman spoke again, to hear that she had seen fit to change the subject.

"Boss Flanity felt some punkins when he led that thar posse away, didn't he, Spikes? It would be er joke if ther outlaws sh'd put er bullet inter him!"

"Sarve him right fer leavin' ther settlement's funds unprotected," was the reply. "Thar's five thousand in paper er lyin' in his safe at ther courthouse, an' nothin' ter start ther bank with ef ther strong box was looted!"

"Thet thar's so! I didn't think of that at first," said the woman. "Who's er makin' shift ter watch ther courthouse, anyhow?"

The man muttered some names that were unintelligible to Higgins, and, just at that minute, there was a slight cry from Isabel.

"Look! See that poor old man! What is the matter with him?" she asked, sharply, and every man in the room who was sober enough rushed to the door and windows.

An old man, dressed in rags, and wearing a long, rusty-looking beard, was riding slowly by, his chin almost on his knees, and both were on the horn of the saddle.

Isabel flattened her face against the window, while Higgins looked over her shoulder, and they soon saw two more riders, who appeared to be cowboys, following the queer old fellow and jeering at him rudely.

"Who the deuce is he, anyhow? He's makin' straight fer ther courthouse," said the fellow who had just been talking with the landlady.

"An' them fellers are pesterin' him," laughed one of the men. "Waal, ter tell ther truth, he is a curus-lookin' critter, all right—er sort of er cross 'twixt Santa Claus an' Robinson Crusoe!"

"There they go inter ther courthouse, the whole lot of 'em!" cried the red-headed woman. "An' ter think old Flanity's gone an' thet thar money in the strongbox is unprotected except by——"

The sentence was never finished, for, just at that minute, Isabel gave a shriek of alarm that made every person in the barroom look at her.

"It is Jesse James and his gang!" she screamed. "That is Thoroughbred Bess, one of our best horses!"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN PRISON.

As the half-drunken men realized her words, they became utterly bewildered, and not one seemed to be able to move a muscle.

Higgins caught up a revolver that was lying on a table, and, facing the strange group, he called them to action.

"Quick! Arm yourselves, men! We must protect that money!" he cried, sternly. "Come, we are three to one! We must capture those fellows!"

He dashed out of the tavern with Isabel and three of the men following, and, as they reached the street, a dozen good, sturdy inhabitants joined them.

Higgins waved his revolver and looked back over his shoulder as he ran, and he was glad to see that even the drunken fellows were following.

Just as they reached the courthouse door they heard a shrill whistle inside, and then a volley of bullets was poured upon them from one of the windows.

The men were thoroughly alive to the situation now, and, without so much as glancing up, they pressed on in a body, leaving two of their number lying dead behind them.

Higgins let out a yell as he entered the courthouse door, and, as the posse behind him crowded to his side, the robbers dashed through the building, making for another door that was locked and bolted.

Putting his shoulder to the panels, Jesse James burst the hinges, and, as the heavy door crashed to the ground, it bore down the two men who had run around the building for the purpose of guarding it.

The outlaw had discarded the long whiskers which he had worn on his entrance to the building, presumably because they got in his way when he was stacking up the money, but he still wore the ragged clothes and dirty slouched hat, yet the detective knew at a glance that Isabel had not been mistaken.

Stumbling over disordered furniture and dead bodies, the detective reached the rear door, while the cracking of weapons sounded in every direction.

Two members of the newly-organized posse had succeeded in cutting off the outlaw's retreat for an instant, but a revolver leveled at them both and fired simultaneously, dropped them in their tracks on the very doorsteps.

Higgins raised his weapon to fire, but some one struck his arm and the bullet went wild, burying itself in the ceiling.

Leaping over the bodies on the steps, the outlaw gained his horse, and, as his men attempted to follow him, they were fairly riddled with bullets.

"Stop him! That is Jesse James!" yelled Higgins, as

he dashed through the door and sent a leaden missile hissing after the outlaw.

The bullet cut its way across the wide brim of the outlaw's hat, and, like a flash, the fellow rose in his stirrups and returned the onslaught.

"Ha! ha! That was well done for a left-hander!" he shouted. "We'll meet again, you bloodhound, and then, perhaps, you can do better!"

Higgins put up his weapon, for the outlaw was out of range, and, as he turned with a sigh of disappointment, he found Isabel close behind him.

The brave girl had taken part in the whole proceeding, and the men were already crowding around and patting her on the shoulder.

"Thet thar kid is er brick! He's grit clean through!" said one. "Snakes! but he's as handy as any on us with er trigger!"

"Have the scoundrels taken anything?" asked Higgins, trying to distract their attention from Isabel.

"Ther money is gone, box and all," was the answer. Then some one yelled that the box was there, but it was open and empty.

"After him, men!" cried Higgins. "The rascal must be caught!"

"Jess bears a charmed life, an' no mistake! Snakes! Ther courthouse looks as if er cyclone had struck it!"

The speaker was a six-footer who had done good work in the scrimmage, for it was a bullet from his pistol that had killed one of the outlaws.

He turned the bodies of the two men over as he spoke, and the others busied themselves in getting their own dead and wounded together.

"Do you know either of them?" whispered Isabel, as she stood close by her lover and watched the man going calmly through the pockets of the robbers.

"One is a coon and the other is a white man. No, I never saw either of them before that I can remember. But, come, this is no place for you! We'll go back to the tavern!"

He started to lead the way from the courthouse, but, as he did so, a burly form was planted before him, and the "six-footer" put his finger warningly on the trigger of his revolver.

"See hyar, young man, yer are a stranger to us," he began, in a grim voice, "but p'r'aps yer mout as well know first as last that we consider yer appearance hyar somewhat suspicious!"

"What the deuce do you mean? Haven't I explained how I happened to come?" asked Higgins, while Isabel's cheeks grew paler, as she foresaw more trouble.

"It's mighty curus how yer happened ter come with thet thar story an' set all our best men er flyin' an' then, an hour after, ther strongbox is robbed by them pirates," went on the fellow, savagely.

Higgins saw the truth of the remark, and did some hasty thinking.

"You can put me under lock and key, gentlemen, and

keep me until you prove the truth of my story, if I like," said Higgins, coolly. "I've told you the truth, and when your men get back they will corroborate my statements. All I ask is that this boy shall be sent back to mother. She's—she's stopping at the ranch with Widow Archer."

He looked from one to the other as he spoke, but the men shook their heads gloomily. They could not spare a man just then to act as escort for the youngster.

"Then he must stay with me," said the detective sternly. "He's under my care. I'm responsible to mother."

"Ther kid kin take keer of himself, I reck'n, but, if you want ter keep an eye on him, we ain't got no objection, only you'll hev ter step inter ther jail ter find accommodations."

Higgins looked at Isabel, but the brave girl only smiled in his face. She was perfectly happy, knowing that she could stay with her lover. It was weary imprisonment for the posse was long in coming back; but, when they did arrive, they corroborated the detective's story in detail.

Unitah had been found alone in Rotten Gully. The poor girl had been gagged and bound hand and foot by some one, but no amount of threats could make her divulge the name of her torturer. She told them the rest of the story just as Higgins had told it, and the men had gone to the cave and found the dead bodies, also the hoofprints made by the hidden stallion.

The money was gone, but they found one of the bags. It had been ripped open with a knife and then discarded. Later they came across the body of Venner lying face upward in the shallow brook, and, after searching his pockets and finding his badge, they buried him decently.

Then, as a last proof, one of the men had been sent on to Widow Archer's, and here they learned of the boy's identity.

An hour after their return to Lead City, Higgins and Isabel were free, and, when they finally started for the ranch, they were escorted by a posse.

Higgins was ill for a month at the Widow Archer's, but Isabel nursed him tenderly until he was once more sound and healthy.

Another month passed and the two were married in the parlor of the ranch house, and Higgins settled down to ranch life as though he had no other interests.

Nothing was heard of Jesse James for some time after that, and it was even rumored that Frank died of his wounds, but Unitah sought them out at last and denied the assertion.

The poor girl could not get over her infatuation for the outlaw, and, after a time, she, too, disappeared from that section of the country.

The railroad never recovered its dead, and the express companies were minus their fifty thousand dollars, but, although these dreadful deeds of the outlaws only increased the vigilance of every sheriff in Wyoming, not one of them was ever able to draw a bead on the Prince of Outlaws.

THE END.

Next week's JESSE JAMES STORIES (No. 10) will contain "Jesse James' Double; or, The Man from Missouri," detailing another thrilling experience in the lives of the James boys.